

A
Christian in Crisis

Family life thriller

Robert D Turvil

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

CHAPTER 1

It was Tuesday, early July. Samantha Edwards rose swiftly from her bed and knelt to thank God for defending her from all perils and dangers of the night. She'd never been entirely sure what these lurking perils and dangers might be, especially in Southern England where she lived, but it seemed imprudent not to say *thank you*.

She checked self-consciously towards the en suite. Husband Cliff was behind the door. In her late-thirties and of modest stature, she'd had a restless night. 'Not your fault,' she whispered in case God thought she was blaming him. 'It's—'

She fell silent, unwilling to give voice to the stresses that were becoming frighteningly forceful. Each day added new pressures as if monstrous weights were crushing down. Her head began to throb, further disrupting her concentration. Conscious of her limited opportunity, she hurriedly recited the prayers she always said.

By the time Cliff had wandered back from the bathroom, she'd finished and was about to sneak back into bed. He rubbed his freshly shaved chin, irked by her amateurish secrecy. Drawing up to his full six foot, he puffed out his naked chest and held her eyes. 'Hope you prayed for a lottery win.'

Both born in the same year, Samantha and Cliff had been married for fifteen years. They had two children, neither from their first marriages. Bitter acrimony had overwhelmed their quickie divorces leaving no chance of bridge building.

Cliff poked at his brown hair waiting for some kind of response, but there was no point. Samantha wasn't about to answer. She wasn't about to do anything. Shrugging, he crossed to the mirror wardrobes he'd been at such pains to install and plucked out his seen-better-days suit and a clean shirt.

'If you came to church,' Samantha announced as if she'd been bottling it all night, 'I wouldn't have to—' She stopped short, put

her hands into her naturally blonde tresses and let her fingers slide through. Like him, she decided there was no point. He was never going to change. 'All you think about is money.'

'Like you don't,' he mocked. 'What's made you so cranky?'

She kept quiet. Her headache was getting worse and she felt oddly violated, as if her daily prayer ritual had been demeaned.

Cliff saw her retreat but wouldn't let go. 'Why should I come to your church? Six months of Bible bashing hasn't done you any good.'

'You wouldn't understand.'

'I came once. Complete mystery. About time the church realised it—'

'I've no time for this. I'm late.' She headed for the bathroom. On the threshold she glared back, feeling guilty, remembering a proper Christian should defend the faith. 'You should sort out your priorities,' she accused regardless.

He grunted as she vanished into the bathroom. Fresh air from the partly open window encouraged the door to slam. 'Hypocrite,' he retaliated softly, aware she couldn't hear. He then grabbed his pack of mini-mints from what served as her dressing table. After flicking a couple into his mouth, he rolled them round in the way she hated. 'They're tasteless and pointless,' she'd scoff when the mood took her. The criticism always felt unfinished, as if she wanted to add, 'as pointless as you.'

Like Samantha, he knew only too well that things were far from right. Denouncing his mint habit was the least of it. On several occasions he'd come within a hair of saying something, but had drawn back, convincing himself it wasn't worth it. She wasn't worth it. Made no sense to invite a whirlwind of accusations and blame. If she'd had enough of their botched-up life together, she could leave any time she fancied. It wasn't as if he didn't have friends – a couple of mates anyway.

Carrying his sullenness downstairs, he grabbed his own breakfast from a cereal pack and plonked himself at the kitchen table. Like most of the three bedroom house, the kitchen was in need of modernisation, yet their finances couldn't stretch to it.

Ten minutes later, Isabella, their slim and temperamental fifteen year old, and Jake, their seven year old accident, joined him. Isabella wore her most rigid sulk along with her version of school

uniform. As ever, her long ash blonde hair had been carefully groomed. Jake just kept smiling. Cliff didn't smile at all, though he half-heartedly play fought with Jake until Samantha arrived.

As she entered, the already tense atmosphere tightened, except for Jake who ran over and squeezed her close.

'Mummy, why does she say I'll hate school when I'm older?'

Samantha directed her best scathing look towards Isabella. 'Get on with your breakfast. Your sister doesn't—'

'Haven't got no breakfast.' Jake shrugged as he pulled away to sit like a starving urchin at the table. 'No one's given me none.'

'Yes they have,' Isabella chimed in. 'That's why you haven't got anything. Ever heard of a double negative?'

Samantha huffed, not interested in figuring out the validity or otherwise of her daughter's grammatical nitpicking. 'Since you're so clever, you get his breakfast.'

Isabella didn't bother to look. 'He can do it himself. No one ever does anything for me.'

'Speak to your daughter,' Samantha shot at Cliff, instantly exasperated.

'I'm sorting out my priorities,' he snapped back, grabbing his imitation leather bag as he ambled out.

'So you're running off and leaving me to it?'

'Bye, Daddy,' Jake shouted as the front door banged a few minutes later.

'You look a real granny in that moth-eaten dressing gown,' Isabella goaded when she too opted to leave.

Ignoring the dig, Samantha countered, 'You'll take Jake to school.'

'No way! You spawned him; you take him. Bad enough having to drag the little beast home every day.'

'Isabella!' Samantha yelled, but it was no use.

'She's in a mood,' Jake adjudged helpfully as his sister pounded up the stairs. 'I can go to school by myself.'

'No you can't. Get on with your breakfast.'

'Haven't got none.'

Samantha sighed heavily. It was all too much. Cliff had gone his own selfish way and left her cold. Gone to his office, she assumed, rather than travelling off somewhere as he so often did. He'd not said. He'd not even managed his habitual, if cursory, peck on her

cheek.

'Self-centred—' she began before turning back to Jake. Her follow-on thoughts remained unspoken. Cliff's latest outburst was merely a chip from a large iceberg made of broken promises, non-existent ambition and selfish indifference. As a man, husband and father, he was utterly useless.

Samantha's bad morning persisted. When her decrepit city car eventually started, it made even more bizarre noises than usual, not that she took much notice. Her mind was more on finding a parking space near her building; always a problem. To her annoyance, nothing close was available, forcing her into a costly car park. As she walked to her office, her sleeveless beige dress added to her frustration. Refusing to settle, the neckline continually gaped.

On arrival, she sat miserably at her desk gazing at the floor screens she'd furtively gathered to cloak her workstation from others sharing the substantial open-plan area.

Thought you were supposed to watch over me, she grumbled to God. Could have done without uncomfortable clothes and extortionate parking. Thanks anyway, she added hastily.

'You look a bit down.'

Samantha glanced though she'd instantly recognised the voice. It was Donna Leighton, her swanky manager, chic in crisp white blouse and red skirt. Not long out of university and bristling with qualifications, she was the last person Samantha wanted to see. They'd hated each other on sight and that was all there was to it. On a good day, Samantha could mask her feelings beneath a veneer of Christian principles, but this wasn't a good day. For her, there was only one reason the vogueish nag would come stealthily into her make-do sanctuary. She was snooping. Full-of-herself Ms Donna Leighton was trying to catch her out.

'Everything's fine,' Samantha answered.

'Good. In that case there's nothing stopping you delivering that report you promised for yesterday.'

'It's all but done. There was a glitch with the computers and—'

'By 12 noon, Sam. No lame excuses.'

Samantha loathed being called *Sam*, especially by a pretentious clotheshorse like Donna. It simply wasn't her proper name. Worse, Donna always loaded it with a harsh twist, not the soft feminine

tone her correct name deserved. With a perfunctory nod, she opened the computer files she needed and stared pointedly at the monitor.

Donna hesitated, on the brink of saying more, but changed her mind and left. Samantha's stare quickly deteriorated into an unseeing scowl. How can I be expected to concentrate on work after Cliff's unprovoked aggression. Criticising me for being a church going Christian is beneath contempt. Oh God, You must put him in his place... and Isabella needs a good sorting out while you're at it. Prayers offered, she gritted her teeth and set about doing the minimum needed to keep Donna at bay.

At exactly the noon deadline she forwarded the report hoping never to see or hear of it again, but she'd misjudged and wasn't quick enough in leaving for lunch to miss Donna's boomerang phone call.

'What are you playing at, Sam?'

Samantha closed her eyes, belatedly realising her mistake in answering. She kept quiet.

'I've read just a few paras and—'

'You can't possibly have read anything yet,' Samantha rebuffed, hoping for the sound of Donna grinding her perfectly white teeth.

'You're not listening, Sam. From what I have read and flicked through, your collection of meaningless paras doesn't merit being called gibberish, let alone a report.'

'It needs reading properly. I have to go now.'

Fuming at been so sharply wrong-footed, Samantha scurried from the building intent on finding somewhere quiet to eat her sandwiches. Manager or not, Donna had no right to charge straight back and be so ultra critical. That feline has no idea what she's doing, she seethed. Higher management was stupid to hire her. Let themselves be dazzled by her CV – either that, or the way she swans round like a high-end fashion statement.

Samantha took a deep breath to calm down and tried to shove the manager out of her mind. The report was done and it was good enough. With any luck Donna would have found someone else to victimise by the time lunch was over.

Samantha caught herself. It wasn't Christian to harbour bad thoughts about other people, even vainglorious bitches with duplicitous puppy eyes and shiny raven tresses that would make a

top model scream with envy.

‘Samantha!’

Hearing her name, she checked around and saw Horace Armstrong from St Bartholomew’s Church. He was across the road and waving cheerily. Despite the hot weather, he was wearing a waistcoat and tie along with a smart charcoal suit. Her heart sank. She didn’t know many people at church – not many at all if she was honest. It was just her luck he’d latched onto her; bit like a wheezing old dog. He’d probably want to talk religion. He had a habit of ambushing people and babbling on endlessly. She simply wasn’t in the mood.

Having so obviously seen him, she couldn’t pretend otherwise and managed a flat hello once he’d hobbled across the street.

‘Good job it’s summer and you can wear a skimpy dress like that,’ he panted. ‘You on your break?’

She winced, just about resisting the urge to blast him for being so personal. Anything not all-covering and made from canvas was skimpy to him. ‘Yes,’ was all she answered, figuring the less said the more likely he was to go on his way.

‘Then you’ve time for an old man to buy you coffee.’

‘No. Not really, I’m—’

‘I insist.’ He grabbed her hand and pulled her towards an aroma emitting coffee shop just a few yards away. The fine weather had filled the outside seating, not that Horace cared. He made a beeline through the open door directly to the counter.

As the machines gurgled and hissed, Samantha’s face became increasingly flushed and she mentally kicked herself for being so weak. A brief chat on a Sunday was one thing. Being dragged off the street at the start of her precious lunch break was something else. Should have snatched back my hand and told him to find someone else to pester.

‘I know you didn’t want to come in here,’ Horace confessed as if she’d not made it glaringly obvious. ‘Truth is I’m worried about you.’

She frowned across the coffee laden tray he’d set on their tiny table. Though wanting to tell him to mind his own business, she forced a phoney smile.

‘It’s the devil,’ he counselled firmly.

She edged deeper into her padded spindle-back chair. This

wasn't at all what she needed, especially in the heart of a busy coffee shop after a terrible morning. She glanced around hoping everyone else was preoccupied and not listening in to what she feared would be a mortifying lecture. Most people seemed engrossed in their own conversations, but not all. Some coffee drinkers were alone, busy with laptops or smartphones. A few were definitely bending their ears to what was being said at other tables.

'You have to resist him,' he elaborated, snapping back her attention.

She said nothing. Odds were her coffee was too hot and would scald her mouth if she tried to gulp it.

'It's written on your face,' he went on as she silently weighed the pain of scalding against her thirst for freedom.

Aware she had to do something, she brought the cup to her lips. Moments later it was down again. No way could she drink.

Horace soon started again. 'He targets them, you see... new Christians. They're easy prey by comparison.'

Feeling embarrassment chill through her, she spoke dismissively. 'I suppose you mean well, Horace, but this isn't the time or place for talking about... you know.'

'The devil?'

'Yes, him. I've a busy day and—'

'I understand. You don't want some silly old duffer harping on. Just don't forget what I said.'

'To resist him?'

'That I'm worried about you. I get these intuitions, you see. Been unsettled for a while now.'

'No need,' she laughed self-consciously. 'Everything's fine.'

'The perils and dangers of the night,' he announced out of the blue. 'They're not the only things to beware of. Friends can do the work of the devil.'

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