

Damnation

Travers and Palumbo

Book 3

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Chapter 1

On a late summer Thursday evening, Alastair Holt, Senior Pastor at Southern Vales Community Church in McLaren Vale, entered his study to write the sermon he planned to deliver on the coming Sunday.

He drew the curtains to close himself off from the outside world and took his seat at the ancient and heavily marked oak table that had served as his desk for over thirty years. As he adjusted the cushion on his chair to the level of comfort he desired, he noticed the stack of unopened mail his wife, Marianne, had propped up against the desk lamp.

He'd made sure, right from the start of their marriage, that Marianne understood she was not to open his mail. In fact, he'd made a point of telling her that although she was his wife, church business was his business, as were letters addressed to him personally. He'd also taken charge of the correspondence addressed to them both, on the understanding he'd keep her informed about anything she needed to know about. In return, he'd promised never to open letters addressed to her personally.

In Alastair's world, wives were submissive to their husbands, as St Paul had clearly articulated in his letter to the Ephesians, and through his preaching he'd made sure the women in his congregation, including his wife, understood their place. A pastor had to lead his flock by example, according to Alastair's interpretation of the Word of God, and he saw himself as a good shepherd guiding the flock God had gathered around him in Southern Vales.

He picked up the mail and absent-mindedly flipped through the envelopes, dividing anything addressed to Pastor Holt or to the Church from the commercial envelopes containing bank statements and accounts to be paid.

There was no personal mail, which didn't surprise him. It all came by email these days.

At the bottom of the pile was an envelope without a stamp, a postage mark, or even an address. The words 'Pastor Holt' were scrawled across the envelope in thick black ink, in a style that reminded him of the pens he'd seen Trump using to sign his name on Executive Orders when he'd been President of the United States.

Intrigued, he picked up his letter opener and slit the envelope open along its shorter edge, before extracting the single piece of folded A4 paper it had enclosed. He unfolded the paper. It was covered in a jumble of different sized letters cut out of a magazine and glued to the page to form words.

It took him a moment to decipher the message the letters spelt out.

NOWHERE IS SAFE FOR YOU PASTOR SCUMBAG - WE KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE.

Below the words was an image of a black and white flag, which Alastair recognised as the flag of ISIS, an organisation he'd condemned more than once.

He scratched his head. He'd seen similar threats posted as comments under some of the videos on the church's YouTube channel. There must be a local ISIS sympathiser wanting to put the wind up him, he thought, as he crumpled the paper into a ball and dropped it into the wastepaper bin under the table.

He wondered if he should mention it to his son, Thomas, who was also known as Pastor Holt. After all, someone must have hand-delivered it to their letterbox. It was one thing to be threatened online by trolls on the other side of the world hiding behind avatars. They made him laugh, thinking they could scare him into stopping his work of spreading the truth with their hollow threats of meaningless words. But, being threatened by someone local, who actually knew where he lived, that was something, he decided, he probably shouldn't be treating as a laughing matter.

He bent down and retrieved the ball of paper from the wastepaper bin and smoothed it out on the desktop, wondering if it would still hold any clues the police could use to identify whoever had sent it or if he'd obliterated any such evidence by screwing it up and then flattening it out again.

The sound of the garden gate opening and closing caught his attention. It was too early for Marianne to be home from her girls' night out. He wondered who'd be coming at this hour on a Thursday night without ringing first. Even Thomas knew to ring on a Thursday night.

He left the letter on the desk alongside the unopened mail, pushed back his chair, and headed for the front door as the doorbell sounded.

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For Marianne, Thursday nights were an escape from the restrictions of her married life. They gave her an opportunity to be herself, instead of always having to be the pastor's wife. Each Thursday night, she did something away from home while Alastair worked on his sermon. It was an arrangement that suited them both. She got to be with her friends and do as she pleased. He got the undisturbed silence he required for crafting his sermons.

On the fourth Thursday of each month, she caught up with her sister, Georgina, and two of their long-time friends, Sarah and Rose, ostensibly to talk about the books they were reading. They met in a local restaurant at seven-thirty, after they'd dutifully served dinner for their husbands, and talked about all things under the sun until the restaurant closed, when they made their way home to their beds.

Although they referred to themselves as the Thursday Night Book Club, they rarely, if ever, talked about books. Tonight, after the usual round of updates on who was doing what and what their children were up to, Marianne was feeling somewhat uneasy as she listened to her friends talk about coercive control as a form of domestic violence, especially the control of a woman's money, a topic which had been getting a fair amount of airtime on the talkback radio shows they listened to.

'Do you have your own bank accounts?' said Georgina. 'There's no way I'd let Malcolm control what I do with my money.'

'I've had my own account ever since I started work,' said Sarah.

'We have a joint account for household expenses and separate accounts for everything else,' said Rose, 'although John earns three times what I do.'

'What about you, Marianne?' said Georgina.

Caught off guard, Marianne blurted out the truth. 'I've never had an account of my own.'

The others exchanged a glance. Marianne felt as though she'd confessed to a crime.

'What about that credit card you use to pay for things?' said Georgina.

'That's linked to Alastair's account,' said Marianne. 'I've never had a job, so I've never needed to open my own account. To be honest, I've never thought about it.'

'Oh, you've had a job alright,' said Georgina. 'It's just that being the pastor's wife is an unpaid position.'

'Do you have to ask Alastair for money?' said Rose.

'Not really,' said Marianne. 'We have a budget. I know how much I can spend on myself each month. In fact, we've had a budget right from when we

first got married.' Although, I've never had a say in how it's set, she realised, as she explained herself.

In light of the nature of their conversation, she decided it would be best to keep that insight to herself. She didn't want to be accused of letting Alastair control her.

'Yeah, and if I remember rightly,' said Georgina, 'you were a child bride.'

'I was twenty,' said Marianne, smiling. 'Thought I was all grown up at the time but when I look at the kids today, I'm not so sure I was.'

'None of us were that much older when we got married,' said Rose, 'except for Georgina. She was a veritable old maid at twenty-five.'

Marianne laughed along with the others, relieved at no longer being the focus of attention.

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It was nearly eleven when Marianne and Georgina pulled up outside the Holt residence in Georgina's car.

'I'm sorry if I embarrassed you when we were talking about money,' said Georgina. 'Sometimes I don't think before I shoot my mouth off.'

'It's okay,' said Marianne. 'I know a lot of couples don't arrange their finances the way we do. But you know how Alastair is when it comes to family values.'

'Yeah, I often wonder how you put up with it.'

'He's a lot like Dad, you know. Maybe that's why I fell in love with him.'

'That'd be right,' said Georgina, laughing. 'I'm pretty sure Mum's never had her own bank account either.'

'See you Sunday,' said Marianne, opening the door and getting out of the car.

'I'll bring you that book I was telling you about. Perhaps we can talk about it next time.'

Marianne closed the door and stood at the gate, watching her sister's car disappear into the night. When she could no longer see its tail lights, she turned her attention to finding her keys at the bottom of her handbag, before opening the gate and walking up the path to the front door, allowing the gate to swing shut behind her with a clang.

The light in Alastair's study was still on. He must have forgotten to turn it off when he went to bed, she thought. He'd been leaving lights on fairly regularly over the last few weeks, and been a bit defensive when she'd pointed it out to him. She hoped he was only becoming more forgetful, and not showing signs of early onset dementia. He'd only just turned sixty-five, for heaven's sake. Surely God would allow him a few years of peaceful retirement

after his lifetime of dedicated service, she thought, as she put her key into the lock and turned it to open the door.

The light in the hallway was on and revealed a sight that made Marianne catch her breath. Alastair was lying flat on his back on the floor, just beyond the reach of the door. Her first thought was he must have had a heart attack like his father, who'd died from one in his early sixties. They'd often discussed the possibility of it being hereditary, despite Alastair's doctor insisting he was as fit as a mallee bull.

Then she saw the small black object sticking out of the centre of his chest, and the pool of blood that had stained his shirt and soaked into the carpet.

For the next few moments, she stood and stared, trying to make sense of the scene in front of her. She certainly hadn't expected to come home and find Alastair, the man who had insisted she live out her marriage vows to love, honour, and obey him to the letter, dead on the floor with a strange black object sticking out of his chest, right where he'd so often told her his heart was.

She took a deep breath and wondered who had killed him, and why. No name or reason came to mind. Everybody in their community talked about Alastair as if he was the living embodiment of the Word of God he was so fond of preaching. As far as she knew, everybody loved him.

She didn't feel angry, like she supposed she should. Instead, she savoured a guilty moment of gratitude for the person who had done him in before she'd given into the temptation to do it herself. Suddenly, she felt exposed, as if anyone watching could read her thoughts. She turned and looked out through the open doorway. There was no-one there. She shut the door, thinking she'd be safer away from prying eyes.

Instinctively, she knew her interests would be better served if she assumed the role of the grieving widow, of the dutiful wife whose loving husband had been cruelly taken from her, no matter what her true feelings about his death might be. Without thinking too deeply, she realised life would be easier for her if people continued to believe what they'd always believed about their pastor, and remained ignorant of things to which only she was privy.

Finally, reality hit her. Alastair was dead on the floor in front of her. She couldn't just leave him there and go to bed. Someone had murdered him. That wasn't right. She had to report it to someone. What if people thought it was her?

She fished out her phone from the depths of her handbag and called her son, Thomas. He was the assistant pastor and lived only a few minutes away in the house next to the church. He'd know what to do, and who to call.