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The beauty and majesty of the place only add to his fear.

Despite the poor visibility, the building ahead of him is unmistakable. Looking as though it has been carved out of the black sky and then suffused with its own light, it demands his attention. He has seen how even the godless are awestruck when they approach, mere specks in its presence.

He knows that this is a place of superlatives. That this is the largest Anglican cathedral in Europe and the fifth largest in the world. That it has the world's heaviest and highest peal of bells. That it has the country's largest organ. That it even has its own constabulary.

But they are all inconsequential tangibles. It is the sheer spirituality here that he finds overwhelming. If God is anywhere, he is here.

The sense of having been dropped into a mystical land is heightened by the weather. It is late afternoon on the first Saturday of December, but Christmas has come early for some. Snow fills the air. Huge, plump flakes swirl and glide before adding their contribution to the thickening white carpet below. It has created an unearthly silence here, and an unsettling change to the ambient light.





It's a sign, he tells himself. A warning. I should go back. I should get out of here right now, while I still can.

But he presses on, stepping up his pace so as not to fall too far behind the jabbering couple ahead of him. There is some slight comfort to be gained from being in their proximity – some sense of safety in numbers – but he knows it will be short-lived.

The snow crunches and squeaks beneath his boots. The hood of his coat is up and his hands are buried deep in his pockets, but still he shivers. Yet he knows there are beads of perspiration on his forehead, and his palms are clammy. His breathing is shallow and fast, and seems not to be bringing enough oxygen into his body. He feels on the verge of fainting, or at least dropping to his knees to spill his guts onto the pristine whiteness.

At the black iron gates he halts. Oblivious to his actions, the garrulous couple continue their plod towards the West Porch, and his fear mounts with each yard they add to their distance from him.

He looks behind him. Peers through the dense snowfall towards the street.

He is being followed.

He wishes it were not so. Wishes that the dramatic change in the weather would have been enough to provoke a change of plan. But no. The figures are there, and heading his way.

He doesn't have much time.

Facing forward again, he wonders what he should do. He catches sight of the huge statue of the Risen Christ, suspended above the entrance to the cathedral. He would like to imagine it wearing an expression of reassurance, of comfort, but from here





it looks stern and disapproving. As if it is cautioning him not to tarnish this holy place with his troubles.

It occurs to him that it has always been this way. There will be no offers of guidance here. No signs from on high, pointing the way. He will have to find his own path.

The path he chooses is to his left. It takes him through another iron gateway and plunges downwards, as if towards the very bowels of the city.

The route could not be more evocative of death and what lies beyond it. On either side, the path is lined with faded and weather-worn gravestones. Countless numbers of them stand shoulder to shoulder against the high stone walls, their inscriptions speaking lovingly of the departed souls of past centuries. And, if further clues were needed as to the earlier use of this land, over to the left stands the Oratory – now forsaken and derelict, but once a thriving mortuary chapel.

He pauses again. Takes a deep breath. The freezing air stings his nostrils and sends a shiver through his body.

He walks on. Reaches a point that always chills him, even on a bright sunny day. It's a tiny triangle of land enclosed by tall headstones. One stone is missing, allowing entry. It worries him that someone, some dark malignant creature, could be hiding in there, waiting to jump out and attack him.

He tells himself not to be afraid, but his inner voice sounds hollow. There is *every* reason to be afraid of what is coming.

And then he reaches the tunnel. Its mouth is a black hole in the solid rock. He knows the passageway is only short, that he will quickly be on the other side, but still it fills him with





dread. The headstones continue on into that tunnel. They stand to attention as if waiting to pass judgement on whoever dares to pass through the narrow space between them.

He knows he has to go on. He has no choice.

He quickens his pace. Hears the echo of his steps as his feet move from fresh snow to unyielding stone in the enclosed tomb-like space.

And then he is through, and he can breathe again. Can feel the freshness of the snowflakes as they push under his hood and melt against his skin.

He stops here, declining to follow the line of gravestones that bends to his right, through St James' Gardens. It's a small but pleasant park, with its own mineral water spring. At its centre is a monument to William Huskisson, former MP for Liverpool, his accomplishments in that position somewhat overshadowed by his fame as the world's first railway fatality, knocked down by Stephenson's Rocket.

But right now this stretch of land shouts at him of its grimmer past, as the final resting place for sixty thousand people across the ages. He feels he can still sense their presence, as if some trace of their souls has been eternally chained here.

He shudders. And it is not only because of the ghosts.

The moment of decision is upon him. Fight or flight. He feels his stomach tying itself in knots, his intestines clenching and unclenching. He wants to vomit and defecate at the same time. His mouth has dried out and his heart hammers against his ribcage.

I could run, he thinks. I could race through the park and to the far side of the cathedral. I'd be gone before they got here. They'd never know.





But he stands there dithering for too long. They have arrived. He can hear them. He will have to face his fears.

When he turns and heads back into the tunnel, it is as if his body is no longer under his conscious control. It seems to him as though he is simply a passenger in a vehicle, wondering where it will take him.

He sees them, their shapes outlined against the canvas of white beyond the other end of the tunnel. Panic floods his system again, and he dips his hooded head, hiding his face.

I could squeeze past, he thinks. In this darkness, I can't be recognised. I could walk straight past and keep on going, and nobody would be any the wiser.

And then it's as if the knowledge that he has some control over the situation emboldens him. As he draws level with the other occupants of the confined space, he finds himself stopping. Finds himself uttering a word he hasn't heard himself voice for a long time.

It has the desired effect. He registers the confusion, the puzzlement it causes. His pursuers become less than the demons he dreaded, less than the monstrous troll with its Cerberus-like hound. They become what they really are.

A middle-aged woman with her small pet dog.

And so he strikes.

It is all so fast. A blur. His hand leaves his pocket. His fingers curl tightly around the heavy lump hammer as he swings it at the woman's head. But she is fast, too – unexpectedly so – and she manages somehow to get a forearm in the way, and she makes it all go wrong, ruining his aim, getting that limb smashed to pieces instead of her damn head. And then she is screaming, for help





and in pain, and the dog runs off barking, and it seems to him that this is all going to shit, and that he has to bring this to an end, has to fix things. And so he takes another swing at the source of all her noise, and this time he feels the hammer connect with her jaw, and her shrieks cease instantly, but now things become even more terrifying because even in this darkness he can see what she has become. He can see that she is now a slack-jawed zombie-like creature, pushing herself away from the gravestones behind her as if she has just crawled from a coffin beneath the ground, and that useless jaw just hangs and swings, showing him its broken teeth and its bleeding gums and saliva strands as she makes strange keening noises. And it is all fear now, it is life or death for him, it is kill or be killed, and so he leaves it to his body to save him from this apparition, to hit out again and hear the cracking apart of her cranium before she falls, still alive and murmuring and slobbering and drooling, and he has to pound her again and again, grinding that bone and turning that head to mush beneath his righteous blows.

When he is done, when his arm aches with its efforts and his chest heaves for oxygen, he rests against the wall and looks down at his handiwork. Looks down at the still pile of rags that once enveloped a living, breathing force.

Movement catches his eye, startling him. But it is not from the woman's corpse. Sitting in the mouth of the tunnel is a small dark shape, staring back at him, its eyes gathering what little light there is and firing it back at him in twin concentrated beams. He would like to imagine it as some tiny malevolent sprite, released from the unwitting host that has just been vanquished. But he





knows it's only the dog. It sits amid the swirling flakes and waits patiently for its owner, seemingly unaware that all around, the snow is turning dark with her blood.

He chuckles silently at the extent of his own fear. All that wasted emotional turmoil. Telling himself he couldn't go through with it. Convincing himself it would go so badly wrong. Desperate for some higher power to intervene and prevent it happening.

Well, now it's happened.

And for once, God seems to have been on his side.

