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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Redeemed**

Written by M. R. Hall

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# ONE

JENNY WAS DRINKING CORDIAL BY the stream at the end of her overgrown garden, watching a school of tiny brown trout flick this way and that, quick as lightning. It was late June and the sweet-smelling breeze was warm against her bare legs. Before the telephone intruded she had managed to lose herself – how long for, she couldn't say – hypnotized by the gently swaying ash trees and the buzz of grasshoppers in the nettles.

A moment of peace. Too good to last.

She walked back across the ankle-high lawn, hoping that whoever was disturbing her on a Sunday morning would give up and leave her to her daydreams. They didn't. She had counted eight rings by the time she stepped through the back door of the cottage onto the cool flags of the tiny kitchen, ten by the time she had lifted the iron latch to the living room, which smelled of old oak and soot from the inglenook. It was much colder inside than out. The flesh on her arms tightened into goosebumps as she lifted the receiver.

'Oh, you're there, Mrs Cooper.' It was Alison, her officer, with a note of reproach in her voice.

'I was outside.'

'CID just called me. There's a body they think you might want to see while it's still in situ. Looks like a suicide.'

She was a coroner again.

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‘Is there any particular reason why I should? I can’t go every time.’

‘You asked them for closer cooperation: this is it.’

‘I thought they might do something useful like email a photograph.’

‘It’s progress, Mrs Cooper. Between you and me, I get the impression that they’re a little bit frightened of you.’

Jenny couldn’t imagine frightening anyone. ‘I suppose I’d better show willing. Where is it?’

‘St Peter’s Church, Frampton Cotterell.’

‘I don’t think I know it.’

‘You’ll like it. It’s a lovely spot.’

The Severn Bridge was all but empty of traffic as Jenny crossed the mile-wide river into England. Beneath her the tide was chasing out to sea at a gallop, the best time to jump if you didn’t want to be found: you’d be halfway to Ireland before low water. That’s how Alec McAvoy must have judged it, over three months ago now. She thought of him each time she crossed, picturing his hair blowing over those moss-green eyes, too young for his face, as he said his final prayers.

A forensics van, a single squad car and an unmarked pool vehicle were parked in the quiet road outside the elaborate Gothic church. A skeleton Sunday crew. A handful of teenagers were loitering on the other side of the road, a skinny blonde girl talking excitedly into her phone, thrilled with the drama of it all. It wasn’t even a policeman who had been posted at the churchyard gate, but an overweight community support officer who made a meal of checking Jenny’s credentials before letting her through as if he were doing her a big favour. She didn’t react, the Xanax she had taken with her breakfast keeping her calm.

The activity was in a far corner beyond the gravestones,

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an untended triangle that had been left to grow wild. A plain-clothes detective glanced up and saw her coming but made no effort to step forward to greet her, his focus switching immediately back to the body. He watched intently while two men in white overalls, one with a camera, the other with a measuring tape, recorded every detail of the scene.

She made an effort to sound friendly. 'Good morning. Jenny Cooper. Severn Vale District Coroner.'

'Tony Wallace. DI.'

Somewhere in his late forties, slim and fit, he spoke with the clipped abruptness of a man who still entertained ambition. He was wearing what might have been a hand-tailored suit, far smarter than most of the policemen she had met.

She followed his gaze to the body lying amongst the rye grass and buttercups. It was that of a naked, well-built man in his thirties. His head, which was facing towards them, was shaved to a tight crew cut to disguise his balding temples. He was lying on his back, arms at forty-five degrees to his torso. Carved into his chest and abdomen, stretching all the way down to his groin, was the sign of the cross. By the outstretched fingers of his right hand Jenny caught the glint of a kitchen knife, the blade no more than four inches long. His skin was waxy yellow and his stomach and face had begun to bloat; bluebottles were gathering on the eyes, lips and genitals.

'Looks like he's been here a few hours,' Jenny said, familiar enough with corpses after a year as coroner not to recoil.

'Yesterday evening at the latest, I'd say,' DI Wallace replied.

The men in white overalls nodded their agreement, the larger of the two saying, 'Definitely twelve hours plus – you've only got to look at the colour of his skin.'

'Any idea of the cause of death?'

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‘Not yet,’ Wallace said. ‘Apart from the cross, there’s no sign of any injury.’

‘Who found him?’

‘Couple of kids looking for somewhere to drink their cider. We found his clothes in the bin over there.’ He nodded towards the corner of the church.

‘Do we know who he is?’

‘Not for certain, but a woman who lives a couple of miles down the road reported her husband missing this morning. Sounds like him – Alan Jacobs, thirty-five, senior psychiatric nurse at the Conway Unit.’

Jenny felt a cold tightness grip her chest. The Conway Unit was a secure psychiatric facility for the newly sectioned and acutely ill. At the height of her ‘episode’ she had once spent a single night there. Dr Travis had persuaded her it was for the best, but it was the closest thing to hell on earth she had ever known.

She looked again at the dead man. She didn’t recall seeing him at the unit, though she could imagine him as a nurse. He was big, like so many of them were, but with gentle hands and a soft face.

‘What do you make of the cross?’ Wallace said, his tone softening a little now he could sense she wasn’t vying for control.

Jenny shrugged. ‘I’d say God was on his mind, or what was left of it.’

Wallace nodded, making no comment, then said, ‘I’ve got a busy few days coming up – I persuaded the pathologist to come in and do him straight away. Is that all right with you?’

‘Fine,’ Jenny said, surprised he was troubling to ask. ‘What’s this, be nice to the coroner week?’

‘You’ve earned yourself a reputation, Mrs Cooper,’ DI Wallace said. ‘And I’m trying to make Super.’

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‘Right – hence the suit.’

He looked at her, puzzled, and pulled out his phone.

‘Whatever . . .’ She nodded at the body. ‘I’ll catch up with him later at the morgue.’

Leaving Wallace to his phone call, she made her way back across the churchyard.

She had a hectic week in store, too. There’d been a messy construction accident the previous Tuesday which had prompted five separate firms of lawyers to bombard her office with demands for all manner of forensic investigations to which her puny budget wouldn’t stretch. The inquest, when it came, would last the best part of a month. Two workmen and a site supervisor had been crushed to death in a crane collapse, six others injured. Compared with that mess, dealing with a simple suicide would be a holiday.

She drove into the city for a light lunch at a new Italian cafe on the waterfront, sipped her mineral water like a good girl – she’d managed to stay dry since her little slip-up with Alec McAvoy – and headed out to the mortuary at Severn Vale District Hospital in time to catch the end of the autopsy.

Dr Andy Kerr was stooping across the steel counter when Jenny entered, picking over a portion of viscera. The radio was playing the same kind of tuneless R & B her teenage son inflicted on her every time they shared a car. Andy – he had somehow persuaded her not to call him Dr Kerr – was reluctantly creeping into his thirties and trying to turn the clock back. He’d recently added a gold stud to his left ear.

She tried not to look too closely at the corpse, which lay open from neck to navel on the autopsy table. ‘Find anything?’

‘Hold on . . .’ Andy said, concentrating on his delicate task. With a pair of tweezers he lifted something tiny

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out from what she could now see was the dead man's stomach and placed it in a kidney dish. 'Looks like we might have a cause of death shaping up. He had a belly full of pills.'

'That makes sense. The police think he was a psychiatric nurse.'

Andy extracted another object, an undigested white tablet, and held it up to the light. 'PB 60. Phenobarbital, probably. Used to treat seizures. Depresses respiration and leads to a fairly painless death. And there's liver inflammation, which would be a side-effect of the overdose.'

'An unequivocal suicide.'

'More or less.'

'There's something else?' She sneaked a glance and wished she hadn't: the empty ribcage was a sight from a butcher's window.

'Minor lesions on both forearms.' He looked at her over his mask. 'As if someone had dug their nails in, perhaps.'

'Violently?'

'Hard to say.' Finished with the stomach, he picked it up in both hands and placed it alongside the other major organs he had examined and cut into sections. 'You don't know if the police turned him over? Blood had pooled towards the front of his body but the photos they took at the locus show him on his back.'

'Unlikely. The DI said some kids stumbled across him – maybe it was them?'

'Kids? You think they'd touch a stranger's corpse?'

She considered the prospect. 'No, I don't.'

Andy picked up a scalpel and returned to the body. 'Well, someone did.' He began cutting around the hairline in preparation for peeling the scalp forwards over the face. It was Jenny's cue to leave.

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She telephoned DI Wallace as she stepped out into the welcome fresh air, the smell of death clinging stubbornly to her clothes. Wallace listened to Andy's findings and said it sounded as if it would have to remain a police matter, at least until he'd ruled out the possibility of foul play. He informed Jenny that Mrs Jacobs had identified her husband's body from a photograph but had been too emotional to talk. In the meantime he'd been over to the Conway Unit in Clifton and met Alan Jacobs's line manager, a Mrs Deborah Bishop. Jacobs had been Senior Staff Nurse in the young persons' ward, dealing with twelve- to eighteen-year-olds. As far as Bishop had been aware he'd been in good spirits; she had appeared badly shaken at the news.

'Have you got Mrs Jacobs's address?' Jenny asked.

'39 Fielding Road, Coalpit Heath,' DI Wallace said after a brief hesitation, the tightness in his voice suggesting that he'd rather she stayed away from the bereaved until it was her turn.

Jenny's gut told her there was more to his reluctance than protecting his turf. She wondered if Bishop had told him something he hadn't let on. A death, however loosely related to vulnerable teenagers, would have set alarm bells ringing all the way to Whitehall. Senior civil servants in the Department of Health would already be asking questions of their own.

Jenny thanked him for the information and let him know he wouldn't be having it all on his own terms: 'I'll have my officer take Mrs Jacobs through the procedure. Oh, and by the way – did your people alter the position of the body before I arrived?'

'Not to my knowledge. Seen as found.'

'Let me know if you hear different. Dr Kerr thinks it had been rolled over.'

The detective gave a dismissive grunt and rang off.

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Jenny waited until early evening before calling on the widow. Technically there was no need for the coroner to disturb the next of kin while the police were still investigating, but she liked to make contact while emotions were still raw and before questions had to be thought about before being answered. And there was something about Wallace that had troubled her. From the moment she arrived in the churchyard he had seemed distracted and defensive, a man wrestling with an unspoken problem.

Coalpit Heath was an outlying suburb in the north-east of the city. She had resolved not to wake the household if she found it in darkness, but as she drew up opposite number 39 she noticed a crack of light behind the drawn curtains in the downstairs front room.

A woman in her sixties answered the door on the security chain, her face set in a hostile frown. 'What is it now?' The sound of a child's cry carried from somewhere inside the house.

Jenny passed a business card through the crack. 'Jenny Cooper, Severn Vale District Coroner. I'd like to speak to Mrs Jacobs?'

The woman held the card at arm's length, trying to make out the print. 'I'm her mother.'

'Would it be all right to have a brief word?'

Sighing, she unhooked the chain and opened the door. 'The police have been here all evening. I thought we'd have some peace.'

'I'll be as quick as I can.'

The woman led Jenny through a short hallway and into a living room that ran straight through into a modern kitchen. Her daughter, the widow, was lying on a tan leather sofa wearing pyjamas and a towelling dressing gown. A waste basket next to a coffee table was overflowing with used Kleenex.

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‘Ceri? It’s the coroner,’ the older woman said quietly. ‘Don’t worry about Josie. I’ll see to her.’

Mrs Jacobs lowered her feet to the floor. She was thirty-five or thereabouts, pale with mousy blonde hair cut in a sensible bob. She attempted a smile with her ‘hello’, and Jenny saw in her face that she was suffering from shame as much as grief.

‘Sorry to disturb you, Mrs Jacobs. I know it’s a difficult time.’

‘It’s all right.’ She spoke with a soft Welsh accent.

Jenny sat on a chair that matched the sofa and glanced around a room that seemed to have been disturbed. The books and DVDs on the shelves by the television were in a jumble. Toys spilled over the edges of a plastic crate.

Embarrassed by the mess, Ceri Jacobs said, ‘The police were here most of the evening. They went through everything. I haven’t been able . . .’ She swallowed, holding back tears. ‘How can I help you?’

‘They might have explained that if they don’t suspect foul play it’s my job to determine your husband’s cause of death.’

Mrs Jacobs nodded and reached for a Kleenex.

‘Were they looking for anything in particular?’

‘They said it was routine. I can’t remember all the things they took.’

‘Computer? Address book?’

‘Yes, and some of his clothes.’ She pressed the tissue to her eyes. ‘Ones that hadn’t been washed. I don’t know what for.’

‘Computers are always taken as a matter of course. They’ll check the clothes for third-party DNA,’ Jenny said. ‘Just in case.’

‘No one wanted to kill Alan . . . Why would they?’ Ceri Jacobs shook her head with an expression of bewildered incomprehension.

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‘The pathologist found pills in his stomach, Mrs Jacobs. Phenobarbital. It’s a barbiturate, something he might have got hold of at the unit.’

Her gaze turned inwards as she seemed to disengage, not yet ready to absorb this information.

‘Was he depressed?’

‘No, not that he admitted to me. Work has always been difficult, but he loved it. It was his vocation.’

‘Was he being treated for any psychiatric condition, or had he ever been?’

She shook her head.

‘When did you last see him?’

‘Yesterday afternoon. He said he’d had a call from the unit saying they had several staff sick. They asked if he could cover for the night.’

‘Was that unusual?’

‘It happens.’

‘What time did he leave?’

‘About four o’clock. I thought he’d be back by midnight. Josie woke me about six and I saw he hadn’t been home. I tried to call him but his phone was off . . . I don’t know why, but I called the office at the unit. They said he hadn’t been in, they had all the staff they needed.’ Her eyes filled with tears. ‘That’s when I called the police.’ The widow pressed her hands to her face. ‘Why? . . . What was he thinking of?’

Jenny had tried to train herself not to form judgements on first impressions, yet she couldn’t help thinking that Mrs Jacobs’s knowledge of her husband might have been incomplete, to say the least. The house was a showcase exclusively for their child: framed baby photographs on every surface, nursery school paintings plastering a noticeboard that took up most of the kitchen wall, even Ceri’s stretchy pyjamas were decorated with purple hippos. Alan Jacobs left here

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each day to work with the city's most mentally disturbed teenagers, a job he could only have succeeded in by winning their respect and connecting on their level. Yet it was as if his wife had organized her home as a shield against all that; there was nothing of him or his life outside the family home on display. It looked as if Ceri had decreed that their child was all that mattered to them.

Jenny realized that she'd missed something: God featured here, too. The simple oil painting on the wall behind the sofa was an icon – a modern rendering of the Virgin and Child – and Ceri wore a silver crucifix around her neck.

'Did the police tell you anything about your husband's body, Mrs Jacobs?'

'I know he was –' she could barely bring herself to say it – 'naked.'

'And the cross on his torso?'

She shot Jenny a look she wasn't expecting, a flash of steel as sharp as a razor. 'What about it?'

'Why might he have done that – assuming it was him.'

'I've no idea.'

'I assume you're a Catholic, was –?'

'No, he wasn't,' she interrupted. 'For most of his life Alan wasn't religious at all, his family had poisoned him against it. But he had begun to change. He was an enquirer at St Joseph's. He'd been every Tuesday night for the last five months.'

'An "enquirer"?''

'The church runs courses for those who want to learn about the faith.'

'Did he talk to you about it?'

'We talked about everything, Mrs Cooper. We were man and wife.' She stood up from the sofa. 'I'm sorry, my daughter's still crying. I'd like to go to her please.'

'Of course.'

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‘If you wouldn’t mind seeing yourself out.’

As Jenny made her way to the front door she felt the coldness of the widow’s disapproval follow her to the threshold and beyond. Driving away from the house, she was left with an image of Ceri’s face, the look she had given her: like an accusation of heresy. She imagined the dead man mute in the face of his wife’s silent judgement, enduring his suffering alone.

She was reluctant to trust her too-often flawed intuition, but the visit had left her in no doubt: Alan Jacobs had departed this world with many dark secrets.