

THE
DEVIL
INSIDE
D.L. HICKS



PANTERA
PRESS

CHAPTER 1

A Sunday morning, 1987

It's the smell of incense that always takes me back.

That smoky, burnt odour in my nostrils every Sunday morning sent my body into overdrive. The priest carried the large silver canister on a chain, swinging it back and forth, grey fumes floating out in a thin haze around us.

Sweat popped on my skin, small beads appearing on my top lip, my forehead, the palms of my hands. Struggling to hold onto the candle, I walked down the central aisle. Rivulets of moisture ran down my spine, pooling under my tunic right where the elastic waistband of my shorts dug into the small of my back.

I was only ten years old.

My best friend Benjamin walked beside me holding the shining gold cross aloft. He was trying not to laugh, like always. I was jealous of Ben – his ability to just carry on.

We approached the altar and separated to stand either side of it. The sound of our shoes on the carpet, the soft, almost imperceptible swish of rubber soles on tightly woven pile, served as another reminder of where I was; of exactly what the morning would bring. As I placed the candle on the patterned silk cloth covering the wooden table, my hands trembled; the size of the congregation was only partly to blame for my nervousness. As I took my place by the raised platform, on one of the seats provided for us, I looked out at the sea of people, my eyes wandering through the crowd, searching.

I found them. Mum and Dad, perched three rows from the front, faces raised expectantly, waiting with bated breath for their next instalment of spiritual enlightenment. Dad caught me glancing their way and winked, a smile breaking across his weathered face, pride in his eyes.

I smiled back, knowing that was what he wanted. Inside though, my guts churned like a cement mixer.

‘Welcome, my friends – God’s chosen ones – to another day where we give thanks to the Lord our Saviour by coming together in this way, to celebrate His life and all that He sacrificed in our honour.’ Father’s voice boomed out, the amplification from the microphone hardly necessary. As someone who had been on the end of one of his tirades, I could attest this was always the case. He was a large man, slightly hunched, with a voice that seemed to well up from the ground itself. He wasn’t as old as some of the priests I’d seen around, but he wasn’t as young as our second priest either. Somewhere in the middle. He was the boss though. Everyone knew that when it came to the parish, what Father

said went. Simple as that. ‘We gather here today to offer thanks for what He has given us, to pray that we may live up to the expectations He has set for us, and to attempt to gain meaning from the struggles and battles we come up against in this world each and every day. Issues of family, of relationships, of work and, of course, of religion ...’

As Father’s voice droned on, Ben’s hand reached out across the small gap between our seats. His fingers closed over mine as I grasped the metal edge of my chair. I was sure he’d feel my heart thumping in my hands like I’d sometimes seen on the cartoons when Daffy Duck smashed his thumb with a hammer.

As the service carried on and we performed the duties expected of us, the tension inside my small frame increased. Ben would sneak a cheeky grin at me whenever he got the chance, and in those split seconds, I would be a child again – happy and carefree. The briefest of moments that shone like stars in a very dark sky.

‘... And so it is with friendship and humility that we offer each other a sign of God’s peace.’ Father’s words rang across his flock, and they turned to each other, extending their hands and smiling; total strangers wishing each other the peace of God. Ben and I stood, waiting patiently for Father to come and share that peace with us – his public display of support for all to see.

He walked towards us, his robes flowing behind him. Ben was first, and I felt him recoil slightly at the contact. His arm hung out limply. ‘Peace be with you, Father,’ he said, his voice barely audible.

‘And with you, my son,’ Father said, teeth bright against his olive skin. He turned to me then, reaching out with his right hand while his left hand cupped my shoulder, holding me in place. ‘And peace be with you also.’ His eyes bore right through me, into that dark place where my soul lived, a plaster smile stuck to his face. His fingers wrapped around mine, skin damp, and he shook my hand forcefully.

Then he let me go and spun on his heel, his robes like a superhero’s cape behind him. It was time for Holy Communion. Ben and I shared a glance before we headed back into the spotlight. We produced the ornate chalice and the decanter of wine, and placed them carefully on the altar, then stole ourselves away again.

‘... Breaking the bread, he gave it to his disciples and said: “Take this, all of you, and eat it. This is my body, which will be given up for you ...”’ Father raised the bread above his head, gazing upwards and blessing the offerings that his congregation were about to receive.

At that precise moment every week, I wondered if God actually *was* watching. Was it true that he was looking down on our church and everyone in it, shining his light onto us, and into our hearts and minds? Did he see everything that happened in here?

The worshippers came forward one by one, many blessing themselves as they returned to their seats, their place in heaven secure for at least another week.

Ben and I tidied up the altar, returning it to its pristine condition while Father sat, quietly contemplating his farewell

message. He rose and stood at the lectern. The congregation rose with him.

‘And so, we come to the end of another celebration of God’s work. But before we leave, I feel the need to share with you all the theme of this week’s liturgical groups – that of forgiveness. Just as we will be forgiven our sins when we appear before God, so must we be mindful of exercising forgiveness to those we feel have wronged against us in the community. Doing this allows us to bring a small piece of God into our world on a daily basis – and that is the highest honour we can engage in. In parting, I challenge you all to focus on forgiveness this week, and in turn pray that those you have wronged will find it in their hearts to forgive you also.’ He raised his hands, reaching towards the crowd. ‘Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.’ His words rang out, the Mass complete, and my blood freezing in my veins.

Ben and I followed Father out to the church’s back rooms, our small procession coming to a halt as we entered Father’s preparation room. ‘Well done, boys,’ he said, his godly facade left behind at the altar. He grabbed us both, his robust arms wedging us together, ensuring we had no wriggle room whatsoever. ‘It’s good to see my A-team performing to their usual standards – that’s the way I like it.’ He let us go, and then extricated himself from his thick purple-and-white silk robes, pulling them over his head, before folding them neatly and placing them in the wardrobe. As usual, he was dressed smartly underneath – black pants, a black short-sleeved shirt and the traditional clerical collar. ‘I’ll be back shortly, boys,’

he said, winking at us. ‘You know the drill. Father will join us, and we’ll have our usual discussion from there.’

There they were – the words that sent a shiver down my spine.

We’ll have our usual discussion from there.

He spoke them so openly, safe in the knowledge that in his world, at least, things operated precisely as he wanted them to, no questions asked. Ever.

Our parents were proud as punch that we had been chosen to perform such important roles in the functioning of the parish. How could they not swell with delight at the rituals we had been hand-picked for?

I knew they trusted Father implicitly, as we all did – indeed, his word was the Word of God.

CHAPTER 2

Present Day

‘That’ll be for you, Charlotte.’

The chorus of voices rang out as one. They always did whenever the phone rang in the Criminal Investigation Unit office. It was an ongoing joke: one that was starting to wear a little thin on the only female detective in the region. There was an office strength of four – well, a sergeant and four, to be exact. As the lone female, Charlotte Callaghan copped the brunt of everything from an excessive workload to sexist jokes. It was pretty simple – if she was the only one to answer the phone, she was the only one who got all the work. That was their theory anyway, and they were sticking to it.

Charlotte flung her long red hair back from her face, grabbed the ringlets at the base of her neck and adroitly secured the bunch in a ponytail before answering the phone. She wasn’t afraid of work – not now, not ever. That was part of the reason why everyone loved her – especially her colleagues.

‘CIU, Charlotte Callaghan speaking,’ she said, rolling her eyes at her workmates, who were laughing in the background like a bunch of hyenas. *Immature pack of bastards*, she thought, only half concentrating on the call.

‘Charlotte, it’s Tom here. Have you been monitoring the radio?’

Tom was a uniformed copper who Charlotte had worked side by side with for years. She knew she could trust anything he said, not like some of the new members coming through. Some of them didn’t seem to know their arses from their elbows. Right now, Tom was on the divisional van.

‘No, mate, I’ve been a little busy here,’ Charlotte said. ‘What’s going on?’

‘*You’ve* been a little busy?’ Tom said. ‘Try working the van – we’ve been absolutely belted and now there’s this doozy. We’ve got a body, and we’re going to need you guys out here asap – looks like someone’s had a bit of fun with this one.’ Tom had begun whispering, a sign that Charlotte read immediately: there were people there who didn’t need to overhear this conversation. Media, witnesses, family?

A fire started in her veins, her heart pumping a little faster – the familiar adrenalin rush that was one of the main reasons she did this shit. God knew it wasn’t for the money.

‘Right,’ she said, her mind flicking into gear. ‘You don’t need me to tell you how to suck eggs. Keep any witnesses separated, secure the scene and ... has the coroner been notified yet?’

‘Not yet,’ Tom replied in the same hushed tone. ‘We haven’t been here long ourselves, and the scene’s a little chaotic.’

‘Okay. Try to get on that as soon as you can. We’ll come out straight away.’ As she spoke, Charlotte was already motioning to the other detectives, trying to make sure at least someone would be ready to hit the road with her. Unfortunately, her usual partner was on a rest day, meaning she would be forced to work with one of the two remaining Neanderthals – the duo she always tried to avoid. Sometimes working here was like watching a glacier move.

Still, all she could do was do her job properly. Or at least try.

‘What details have you got?’ she asked, grabbing her day book and flipping to a fresh page – always a bad sign. A fresh page meant a new start, a new job, a new round of victims, witnesses and offenders. In a case like this, the notes she took now, and the manner in which she conducted the investigation, might be brought before a jury a year or two down the track. And she didn’t want to cost the department a conviction through sheer carelessness – she had enough on her plate without having to deal with that type of guilt.

She scribbled away as Tom spoke, taking down as much information as she could. Experience had taught her that it was far better to get the details right the first time than to try to revisit them later on to cover up initial poor work.

‘You know that girl who went missing yesterday?’ Tom said, his voice scratchy in her ear. ‘The one Robbo took the reports for. Christie Dalglish?’

Charlotte nodded, the phone banging against her ear, before she realised Tom couldn't see her. *Idiot*. She didn't know where her head was at lately. 'Yeah, I heard a little bit about it,' she answered, chewing on her pen. She'd glanced at the reports earlier that morning during their daily read-out, but not thought much of it. People went missing fairly regularly, even in a small town like Gull Bay. Usually the reason was nothing more sinister than a drained mobile phone battery. 'Is that the one who never made it home from the gym?'

'Yeah, that's the one,' Tom said. 'It's her we've got here. Her handbag's been left with her ID still in it. She's in a bad way, Charls. We covered her up, but not before she was seen by quite a few people, all of whom are still here and in shock. No leads at all on an offender. We're not even sure how long she's been here, to tell you the truth. It's a little out of the way so she could've been here nearly twenty-four hours and no one's noticed until now.'

Tom continued with as much detail as he could, and Charlotte felt her heart sink as she wrote. A family out there would soon be receiving the most devastating news imaginable: their daughter was never coming home.

She jotted down the time the van had arrived, when they'd been notified of the job, who had found the body; the list of puzzle pieces ticked off one by one. She'd been doing this long enough that the questions sprang off her tongue without her thinking. For a fleeting second, she pondered how sad it was that she'd been involved in so much of other people's misery that dealing with it was now habitual. They

never taught her how to deal with *that* realisation at the academy almost thirty years ago.

‘I take it her family doesn’t know yet?’ she asked, dreading the answer.

‘Nup. As I said, we haven’t been here long, and to be honest that’s been the least of our worries,’ Tom said. ‘Besides, we thought we’d leave that up to you – that’s what you get paid the big bucks for, isn’t it?’

Charlotte barked out a laugh. Normally black humour was right up her alley, but not today.

After getting all the answers she needed from Tom, she put down her pen. ‘Righto mate, we’ll get our shit together and head out. I’ll give the homicide squad a ring too; give them a bit of a heads up on what we’ve got. See you shortly.’

She hung up the phone and glanced back over the page of scribbled notes she’d taken without even getting to the scene yet. Her right hand ached dully – something that never seemed to ease. She took a deep breath; a physical preparation for what was to come.

It was going to be another one of those days.



The pot-holed bitumen road curved through the parkland, morning mist still rising up through the shrubbery as Charlotte drove. Her partner Wally – thrust upon her more because of availability than choice – chewed gum loudly in the seat beside her, each smack of his lips setting her teeth on edge.

The road finished in a small car park adjacent to a number of brightly coloured beach boxes dotted along the foreshore. Charlotte pulled up alongside the angled divisional van. Its strobe lights weren't operating, which was a good thing – the lights drew people in like junkies to an injecting room, and that was the last thing they needed right now.

After shifting her vehicle into park, she reached into the glove box, eased out a pair of bright-blue latex gloves and snapped them on. These days it seemed like she spent more time with the stupid things on than not. Stepping out of the car, she wrapped her thick black overcoat around her body, and wedged a red folder under her arm. The cold of the dawn was still in the air, a crispness punctuated by the lingering saltiness that came with being by the sea. In any other circumstances, it would've been a beautiful, if a little fresh, morning.

As she strode across the car park towards the sound of the sea, the ground beneath her feet altered from harsh bitumen to soft grass before she found herself struggling slightly through sand. The beach was no friend to her black low-cut boots. Even so, she still managed to leave Wally behind – not for the first time, and surely not for the last.

She'd passed three or four beach boxes when she was startled by a uniformed officer emerging from between the next two. Blue-and-white chequered crime scene tape in hand, he began cordoning off the scene to anyone who might happen to wander through. He nodded at Charlotte as she passed; a sign of respect but also, Charlotte suspected, of resignation at what she was about to see.

‘Morning,’ he mumbled. ‘It’s just down a little further. Tom’s waiting for you.’

She left him wrapping the tape haphazardly around the pole of a nearby rubbish bin, again and again and again, like a nurse covering up a snake bite. Stress did funny things to people.

Glancing back at the car park, Charlotte caught a glimpse of a familiar figure, notebook already poised. Dressed in a red skirt and white blouse, her dark hair cut in a sharp bob that framed her face, Katelyn McBride was the local crime reporter. Charlotte had always found Katelyn a bit quirky but, like all good reporters, she seemed to stumble across what was happening and where as if by crystal ball. Katelyn had a unique style when it came to gathering information: she watched rather than asked, observed often without even questioning, yet somehow her articles would appear the following day chock-full of all the pertinent facts – just like magic.

It drove Charlotte crazy and, as she nodded respectfully to Katelyn from a distance, she couldn’t help but curse under her breath.

By the time Charlotte arrived at the area where the body had been found, the sun was poking through the high, thin clouds; a preview of what the rest of the day entailed. Heat caressed the back of her neck and she knew they were in for another hot one. They would have to deal with this scene quickly before the rising temperature – not to mention the local stickybeaks – took a toll.

Walking past more vibrantly painted beach boxes, she noticed two police members – presumably working the other

divisional van – a bit further down, comforting two joggers and an elderly couple, who were sitting on a low bluestone wall that ran along the back of the beach.

‘Witnesses?’ Charlotte said, nodding to Tom as he appeared from between the boxes, sand clinging to the forearms of his dark jacket.

‘Yep.’ He glanced at the people perched on the wall like birds on a wire. ‘They’re a bit shaken up, but they’ll be okay.’

Charlotte jotted her time of arrival down in her notebook. Despite the cool morning, sweat was already beginning to pool in dark patches inside her latex gloves. ‘Okay, let’s do this.’ Feeling suddenly too warm, she fumbled at the buttons on her coat and looked sideways at Tom. ‘You really need that jacket on? You’re making me hot just looking at you.’

‘Steady on, I’d say decent looking at a stretch.’ He grinned slyly as he led the way between the beach boxes to a spot about three quarters of the way along the side wall. Charlotte could see a part-image either side of him as they approached, but it wasn’t until he stepped to one side that she was able to take in the full scene.

The top of a head – messy blonde locks visible – protruded through one end of the black plastic tarpaulin. Lying at a very unnatural angle, two legs extended from the other end, bare feet exposed and already turning blue. Charlotte noticed the toenails: well manicured and meticulously painted bright orange. This was a woman who took care of her appearance. Every detail, no matter how minute or seemingly insignificant, was important right now.

‘Take it off,’ Charlotte said in answer to the inquisitive look from Tom, who stood holding one corner of the tarp, waiting to peel it back. In one swift motion, like a magician pulling a tablecloth right out from under a full dining setting, Tom whipped the tarp back with a familiar crinkle.

They stood in silence, just the two of them, sharing that horrid first moment when death reared its ugly head. The only sound was the gentle lapping of the small breakers, fizzing out on the shoreline before sucking backwards, building and repeating. A seagull squawked overhead.

‘Fuck it,’ Charlotte whispered. It was all she had feared and then some. No matter how many times she did this, she never got over the first sight of a dead body. She took a deep breath.

While her first response to these types of jobs was often robotic, pre-programmed, once she got to the scene, the emotion inevitably kicked in. Seeing what some people could do to another human being was enough to rip your heart out. Every victim was someone’s daughter or son – another family devastated. Even crooks had parents, siblings, often children. The ripple effect was huge and unavoidable.

Charlotte knelt down, the subtle but unmistakable waft of death – a combination of decomposition and fear – channelled into an odour that she knew would linger in her nostrils for days. Heavy, thick air weighed down on her, as if it too were grieving the loss of life. The body was clearly cold, the telltale greyness seeping into the skin around the woman’s lips and eyes – bright blue – which stared vacantly out from her face. She was lying on her right side, not in an indentation in the

sand, but as if she'd been tossed on top of it, discarded, one arm disappearing beneath the weatherboard panels of the beach box. Lividity had already begun to appear, darkening what was visible of the edge of her body pressed into the sand from top to toe, like silt settling on a pristine riverbed. A single fly, which had been buzzing around her open mouth, landed on her bottom lip and momentarily inspected it, before resuming its flight, indifferent. The woman's chest remained still, not even the slightest movement to imply an intake of air to her lungs, as if her body had been filled to the brim with wet cement. That detail alone sent a shiver down Charlotte's spine. It was expected that when someone died their body ceased to function, but to visually absorb the reality of their chest no longer expanding and contracting was the ultimate sign that the spirit had left, never to return. The body was simply packaging that had been cast aside; a vessel that had served its purpose.

There were no signs of a struggle on the ground around them, the small and constant undulations in the sand unspoiled right up to where the body lay. The woman was still fully clothed, the fluorescent splashes of colour on her gym gear stark in the morning light. Her head rested on her right arm roughly, indicating it had fallen there rather than been carefully posed. Her hair, almost the same hue as the sand, cascaded over her shoulders and down to her breasts. A bright-green and black sleeveless exercise top enveloped her body like cling wrap, exposing her midriff, stomach muscles taut. She had been in excellent physical condition.

‘What a waste,’ Tom said softly, shaking his head in disgust.

Charlotte leant forward and examined the woman’s face for bruising. A reddened graze on her left temple suggested some form of blunt-force trauma, perhaps indicative of the manner in which she had been overpowered initially – or perhaps not. The intricate links of the crime all lay before her, but until there was a complete forensic examination, Charlotte could only guess. Educated guesses, of course, but guesses none the less.

Looking at the woman’s legs, she noticed the odd angle at which they were splayed. One of them at least could be fractured, if not both – another thought that sickened Charlotte to the core. Was this a sexual crime? If not, it would be the exception rather than the rule. Lifting the top leg up slightly, she saw a thick pool of blood forming, congealing in the sand around the victim’s lower torso. It looked as if she had suffered a deep wound somewhere, possibly to her back.

Charlotte swallowed the rising in her throat and got to her feet. ‘Find anything of value?’ She stepped around the body to scour the scene from behind.

‘Not yet.’ Tom shrugged. ‘We’ve had a brief look around, but we haven’t had a chance to look extensively.’ He inclined his head towards the small group of people still huddled on the wall. ‘We had to get them the hell out of here first, and since then I’ve just been trying to get her covered up, and waiting for you guys. Hey, are you okay? You look a bit green around the gills.’

Charlotte felt the earth tilt on its axis, her head swimming, a clamminess erupting on her skin. ‘I’m fine,’ she replied a

little too quickly. She knelt down next to the body again to steady herself. She could handle this. ‘I didn’t sleep well last night, that’s all. You mentioned something about an ID when I spoke to you on the phone – where’d you find the handbag?’

‘We didn’t.’ Tom watched her as he leant nonchalantly against one of the weatherboard beach boxes – bright yellow and blue. ‘The old couple sitting over there found the bag resting on the bluestone wall, its contents intact. That’s what made them look around; they thought it was a bit odd, had a bit of a squiz, and then came across this. Poor buggers.’

As Tom spoke, Charlotte squinted under the other beach box. From where she knelt, she could see beneath the wooden base board. She took hold of the woman’s right wrist and slid it out from where it had been lying in the cool shadows. As the hand emerged into the daylight, Charlotte gasped.

Between the woman’s long, slender fingers, curled inward towards her palm, a rectangular piece of folded paper had been lodged. Laying the hand back on the sand, Charlotte grabbed her mobile phone out of her coat pocket. She took a snap of the paper in situ before gingerly removing it.

She glanced up at Tom, knowing this could be a pivotal moment in the investigation. Their eyes met; a brief nod shared.

Charlotte unfolded the white paper, latex-covered fingers slipping slightly. Outspread, it formed a larger rectangle. A colourful sketch of a handful of pink flowers was printed at one end; at the other, words that Charlotte immediately recognised as a piece of scripture.

Revelation 2:10: Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

In the bottom right corner, something had been scrawled in black pen.

#1

And, just like that, the first clue had arrived.