

“In *A Darkly Hidden Truth*, Donna Fletcher Crow creates a world in which the events of past centuries echo down present-day hallways—a world in which saintliness and devotion compete with the noise of traffic, a world in which a thoroughly 21st-century young woman can be drawn to the timeless and luminous peace of the convent—and then, on the surface of this world, she engraves murder, violence, and theft. I came away from the book feeling as though I’d been someplace both ancient and new, and had learned a great deal there. Donna Fletcher Crow gives us, in three extremely persuasive dimensions, the world that Dan Brown merely sketches.”

– Timothy Hallinan, Edgar-nominated author of *The Queen of Patpong*

“Donna Fletcher Crow’s novel, *A Darkly Hidden Truth* is a character-rich contemporary mystery based on English church history that made me want to turn every page, and spend a year in England.”

– Sally Wright, author of the *Ben Reese Mysteries*

“A gripping modern mystery enriched by liturgy, iconography, and medieval history.”

– Donn Taylor, author of *Rhapsody in Red*, *The Lazarus File*, etc.

“The intrepid Felicity and lovable Anthony have their noses to the trail of more dark and sinister goings-on. As they investigate, a tale wonderfully rich in history and spirituality unfolds.”

– Penelope Wilcock, author of *The Hawk and the Dove*

“Donna Fletcher Crow’s *Monastery Murders* series gets better and better. In a book notable for its meticulous research, Felicity is at a crossroads in her life. She has a vocation to the religious life, but where does that leave Antony, who has come to love the young, engaging American? Matters are further

complicated when Felicity's mother, Cynthia, fresh from the break-up of her marriage to Felicity's much-loved father, arrives in England, attempting to forge new bonds with the daughter she never really knew. Matters come to a head when a valuable icon is stolen and a student murdered.

"A sound grasp of Christian history informs this contemporary thriller as Felicity, Anthony and Cynthia are plunged headlong into the dangerous hunt for the stolen icon."

– Dolores Gordon-Smith, author of the *Jack Haldean Mysteries*

"Readers who enjoyed *A Very Private Grave*, the first in Donna Fletcher Crow's *Monastery Murders*, will be delighted with the second in the series. With this book, Crow establishes herself as the leading practitioner of modern mystery entwined with historical fiction ... Her descriptions of the English characters read like an updated and edgy version of Barbara Pym. *A Darkly Hidden Truth* weaves ancient puzzles and modern murder with a savvy but sometimes unwary protagonist into a seamless story. You won't need a bookmark – you'll read it in a single sitting."

– Mike Orenduff, author of *The Pot Thief Who Studied Pythagoras*

A DARKLY  
HIDDEN TRUTH

THE MONASTERY MURDERS 2

Donna Fletcher Crow

MONARCH  
BOOKS

Oxford, UK, & Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

Copyright © 2011 by Donna Fletcher Crow

The right of Donna Fletcher Crow to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

First published in the UK in 2011 by Monarch Books  
(a publishing imprint of Lion Hudson plc)  
Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road, Oxford OX2 8DR, England  
Tel: +44 (0)1865 302750 Fax: +44 (0)1865 302757  
Email: monarch@lionhudson.com  
www.lionhudson.com

ISBN 978 0 85721 050 0 (print)  
ISBN 978 0 85721 052 4 (epub)  
ISBN 978 0 85721 051 7 (Kindle)  
ISBN 978 0 85721 209 2 (PDF)

Distributed by:

UK: Marston Book Services, PO Box 269, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4YN  
USA: Kregel Publications, PO Box 2607, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49501

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan and Hodder & Stoughton Limited. All rights reserved. The 'NIV' and 'New International Version' trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by International Bible Society. Use of either trademark requires the permission of International Bible Society. UK trademark number 1448790. Extract from *The Book of Common Prayer*, the rights in which are vested in the Crown, are reproduced by permission of the Crown's patentee, Cambridge University Press.

The text paper used in this book has been made from wood independently certified as having come from sustainable forests.

### **British Library Cataloguing Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK by MPG Books.

*God of compassion,  
Whose Son Jesus Christ, the child of Mary,  
shared the life of a home in Nazareth  
and on the cross drew the whole human family to himself:  
strengthen us in our daily living  
that in joy and sorrow  
we may know the power of your presence  
to bind together and to heal;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God now and for ever*

*BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, COLLECT FOR MOTHERING SUNDAY*

With endless gratitude  
To my gracious editor  
Jan Greenough

## *Acknowledgments*

The question I am asked most often is, “How much of it is true?” Since I try never to write about any place I haven’t visited, or describe any experience I haven’t had—except the murders and other nefarious doings, of course—it’s all as true as I can make it. As far as things have been recorded. Where the history books end, the novelist’s job starts. Dame Julian’s words are almost all her own, as are Margery Kempe’s. Robert Spryngold was, indeed, Margery’s confessor, but if his successor wrote his memoirs the manuscript is still lying concealed in a cupboard somewhere.

One of my goals as a writer is to give my readers a “you are there” experience by making every scene in my books as accurate as I possibly can. To that end I am enormously grateful to everyone who hosted me and helped with my research endeavors: Hazel Flavell and Nancy Sawyer, my friends and helpers in England through twenty-five years of researching and writing; Father Lee Kenyon for his unending patience in sharing his detailed, in-depth knowledge of all things liturgical; Sir Richard Temple of the Temple Gallery; Father Philip North, Priest Administrator of the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham; Sister Mary Luke Wise, Mother Superior, Community of the Holy Cross, Rempstone; Sister Pamela, All Hallows House, Norwich; Sister Anita, Mother Superior, Community of the Sisters of the Church, Ham Common, London; All of the brethren at the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield, Yorkshire.

You can see pictures from my research trips at: <http://www.donnafletchercrow.com/joinTheJourney.php>

## TIME LINE

### *AD*

1023 Knights Hospitaller formed

1061 Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham established

1119 Templars formed

1307 Templars disbanded

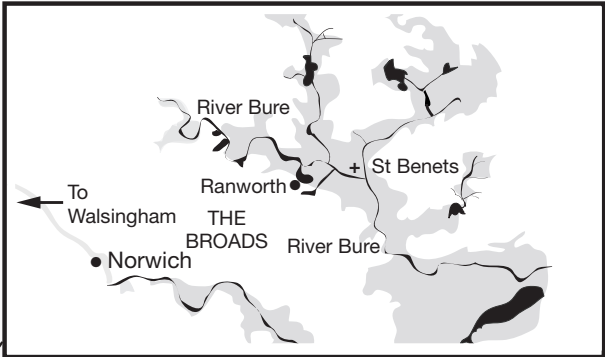
1375 Julian of Norwich enclosed

1417 Margery Kempe visits Julian

1698 Peter the Great visits England

1931 Walsingham shrine re-established





## Glossary

**Alb:** A vestment of white linen, reaching to the feet and enveloping the person.

**Anchoress:** One who renounces the world and secludes herself for religious reasons.

**Ancren Riwe:** Manual for anchoresses written in the early thirteenth century.

**Baldacchino:** A structure in the form of a canopy above an altar.

**Caesura:** A metrical break, commonly near the middle of the line.

**Cassock:** A garment resembling a long frock coat worn by traditional clergy as an outer garment.

**Ciborium:** The coffer in which the host is kept.

**Cope:** An ecclesiastical vestment or cloak, semicircular in form, reaching from the shoulders nearly to the feet, open in front except for a band or clasp, worn in processions and on other liturgical occasions.

**Exultet:** An ancient hymn blessing the Paschal candle sung at the Easter Vigil.

**Humeral veil:** A long, narrow scarf worn round the shoulders by the officiating priest used to protect the sacred vessels from contact with the hands.

**Mensa:** Top surface of an altar, usually stone.

**Muniment room:** Room where documents such as deeds and charters are kept.

**Novice:** One who enters a religious house as a probationer.

**Ordinand:** One studying for ordination.

**Parament:** Ornamental hanging, such as altar cloth.

**Parapet:** A low wall serving to protect the edge of a platform or roof.

**Paschal candle:** Large, white decorated candle blessed and newly lit every year at the Easter Vigil.

**Postulant:** A candidate for membership in a religious order.

**Precentor:** A leader of a choir, spoken or sung; one who leads first in antiphonal reading.

**Reredos:** A shelf or partition behind an altar, usually holding candles, cross, or flowers.

**Rood screen:** a screen, between the choir and the body of the church, over which the rood (crucifix) was placed.

**Sacramentary:** An ancient book giving the rites for Mass, the sacraments and other ceremonies.

**Sacristan:** One who has the care of the utensils, vestments and movables of the church.

**Sacristy:** A room in a church where the sacred vessels, vestments, etc. are kept.

**Thurible:** A metal censer for burning incense, held suspended by chains.

**Thurifer:** A server who carries a thurible.

**Triduum:** The three Great Days leading up to Easter.

**Votary:** One devoted, consecrated, or engaged by a vow or promise.

## Prologue

C. the year of our Lord 1375

Church of St Julian the Hospitaller, Norwich

*“Veni sanctificator, omnipotens aeterne Deus...” The words of the Mass of the Dead echoed from the flint walls of the old church. Dorcas clenched her fists. St Julian’s Church. The church where her daughter would be “buried”. The church which would become her daughter’s tomb. And her daughter’s name.*

*The bishop, sprinkling ashes in her wake, attended “Julian” to her immurement. “Do not weep for the dead, do not mourn them with tears. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, God will bring forth with him all who have fallen asleep believing in him.”*

*The serene young woman stood at the altar in only her shift. Two black-robed Benedictine nuns from the Community at Carrow Abbey, about half a mile down the road, clothed her in a grey gown and white veil.*

*How many times could a mother die? Dorcas felt her heart constrict, saw the darkness closing in around her. And yet it was not herself, but her daughter there at the front of the church in the pale grey gown. It was her dearest Gillian over whom the priest prayed. But Gillian was not dead. Dorcas had never seen her daughter more alive.*

*Following the processional cross carried by an acolyte, and accompanied by chanted psalms and litanies, the procession moved out of the chancel and around the church to a small apartment built against the side of the building. The cell was blessed, the newly professed woman sprinkled with holy water and censured, and then the bishop invited her to enter her tomb. Her face aglow, “Julian” kissed her mother, embraced her sister, and entered. Dead to the world. Alive only to God.*

*“Let them block up the entrance to the house,” the bishop declared. The stonemasons began their work.*

*Prologue*

*It had all happened once before. Once before her daughter had been pronounced dead. But that time she had returned to life. This time she would not return.*

*So what was left for Dorcas? Why couldn't she die, too? She fought against the hardness in her heart. Once she had been totally yielded to the divine will. At least she had believed she was. When Gillian lay dying, Dorcas had prayed first for her daughter's life, then for the eternal repose of her soul, for its eventual glorious entry into heaven.*

*Now, when Gilly would be living, by her own choice, within the same city walls, why was this yielding so much harder? Why could Dorcas not even pray to be made willing to be willing?*

*As the grating of the stonemason's trowel ground in her ears, everyone around Dorcas turned to her with their congratulations. "What a fine thing for Norwich." "How proud you must be of your daughter." "Such a privilege to be the mother of an anchoress." Her daughter would live the rest of her life sealed in this tiny structure built onto the side of the church, and she was expected to celebrate? "A great day for your family." "A great day for all of us."*

*The rejoicing continued. Why wouldn't it? Of course it was a great thing for Norwich. It was a matter of much prestige for a town to have their own anchoress. People traveled from all over England— even from the continent— to visit such famous holy men and women. It was a fine thing for the innkeepers, merchants, and the churches. But did anyone ever think of a mother who was required to stand by and see her beloved child so sealed?*

*"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for me." And as Dorcas spoke those words, the understanding came. Simeon had warned Mary that a sword would pierce through her own soul. Now Dorcas knew: that warning was not just for Mary. It was for all mothers. It wasn't possible to love as intensely as a mother loves without experiencing that sword in her own heart. Dorcas pressed a hand to her breast to still the sharpness of the ache.*

# Chapter 1

*Friday, Third in Lent*

Felicity could hear her heart thudding in her ears as Father Oswin smiled in his slow, thoughtful way and steeped his fingers into a Gothic arch. “And how long have you been feeling this drawing to become a nun?”

Felicity’s swallow was more of a gulp. It all sounded so audacious. It was so unlike her. Fighting a sudden impulse to run from the room, she managed to squeak out in a small voice, “Well, for several weeks now.” *Was almost two “several”?*

Father Oswin nodded slowly and thoughtfully, as he did everything. At least he didn’t burst out laughing. “I see.”

“But the thing is,” Felicity was quite certain he *didn’t* see. “The thing is, it’s so intense. I can’t eat. I can’t sleep. It’s been growing and growing.” She placed her hand over her heart in the region of the growing feeling—compulsion, she might even say.

“Yes.”

Was there ever a more infuriating spiritual director than Father Oswin? Felicity felt so full of exuberance, of desire for action, of nervous tension, it was all she could do to make herself stay seated in her chair while the man sitting across from her in the small confessional room sat so deep in meditation he could be in danger of drifting off to sleep. *What should I do?* she wanted to yell at him.

“Yes. I see.” At long last the monk opened his hands and raised his head. “Yes.” He nodded slowly, giving the word at least three syllables. “Then you must test the Spirit.”

“Great! Er—how do I do that?” Ever since she had come

to study in the theological college run by the Community of the Transfiguration on its remote hillside in Yorkshire many months ago Felicity had experienced almost constant friction between their slow, understated pace of life and her out-to-conquer-the-world American energies, but she had never felt the conflict so sharply before. Nor had her urgency for action been so great. “What do I *do*?” She pulled out a notebook to jot down his instructions.

“How much time have you spent in a convent?”

“Um, well, I was at Whitby—Order of the Holy Paraclete—when Father Antony and I were looking for Dominic’s murderer... When Sister Elspeth...” Felicity stopped with a shudder.

“Yes, terrible business that. Tragic loss.” Father Oswin shook his head. “Hardly a good time for testing a vocation, I would say.”

The tiny room fell silent as Felicity’s mind replayed those all-too-recent events of chasing and being chased across half of northern England with her Church History lecturer, of how her own rashness had led her so far astray, of the penitence she felt for her guilt in the tragic events. And yet, surely good could come even from that. If she were to become a nun herself, perhaps even in some small way fill the enormous gap left by Sister Elspeth’s energy and scholarship and holiness...

“Perhaps you should revisit the sisters there? Or perhaps look around a bit: Rempstone near Nottingham, All Hallows House in Norwich...” Walsingham, Oxford, Burford, the list went on. Who would have thought there were so many convents in England? “The sisters in Ham Common do a wonderful work among the poor, but London might be a bit far afield.” Felicity scribbled as he rattled off the unfamiliar names. “Select two or three for a mini retreat. That should give you some perspective as to what you might be undertaking if you were to pursue a discernment process.”

*Discernment process?* Couldn't she just go off to a convent and take the veil? That's what women did in books. Maid Marian, in Robin Hood, for example. Yes, Marian's convent was supposed to be around here somewhere. The Nun, a pub on the main road behind the Community, was said to mark the spot.

"Of course, you understand, it can take years to test a vocation," Father Oswin's steady voice brought her back. "It's very important not to rush. Let the Spirit lead you one step at a time. Stay in constant tune with him through prayer."

Felicity sighed. She should have known.

"No snap decisions," he added.

Felicity nodded, even as she argued internally. *But that's how I make all my decisions*, she almost blurted it out. And it was the truth—for better or for worse—that was how she always made her decisions. Fast! Just a year ago she had been teaching Latin in a C of E school in London, and hating it. When Rebecca, the vicar of the church sponsoring the school, reminded her that the church was one place Latin was still used and told her about the College of the Transfiguration, it immediately fired her imagination, and here she was—just like that—living through the most momentous year of her life.

Well, OK, not just like that. There was a lot more to it than that. Although her family was far from devout, she had always loved the services she was taken to at Christmas and Easter: the prayers, the music, the altar cloths shimmering in candlelight, the banks of flowers, and then, working with Antony in the past weeks—seeing true dedication up close and personal—after she got over her irritation with him, that is...

Father Oswin brought her back to the present. "I don't know what your class schedule is like just now. Perhaps you have some time off before Easter, if you're thinking of starting right away?"

Felicity nodded. So he did sense her urgency.



“You won’t be likely to find space in any of the houses during Holy Week and, of course, you’ll want to be here then anyway.”

Holy Week. Yes, just over two weeks away. How she looked forward to that. Time to spend immersed in silence, in worship, in holy contemplation. She smiled at herself. If it hadn’t been for Father Oswin’s presence, she would have laughed out loud. If she had been told a month ago she would have had such thoughts, she would have declared that the speaker had taken leave of his senses. Now perhaps she was the one who had gone bonkers. Felicity Howard, the all-American girl, sure of herself, goal-driven, out to set the world on fire, to right all wrong—after all, that was what the priesthood was all about, wasn’t it? Especially for a woman priest.

And then, in the space of a few life-threatening—and life-changing—days, she had encountered true faithfulness in the man she had thought capable of murder. Now she must rethink her whole life. It still galled. She had been *so sure*.

“Don’t rush it. Give the Spirit time to reveal his ways to you.” Father Oswin’s words recalled her once more.

“What? Oh, yes. Yes, thank you, Father. Yes, Holy Week. I am looking forward to that. Everyone says it’s an amazing experience.” In the tumult of her mercurial emotions she smiled at herself once more. Fifty-some services in one week, most of it spent in silence—and she was looking forward to *that*? She truly must have gone round the twist, as the old Felicity would certainly have told her.

“Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?”

The length of her pause was telltale, but Father Oswin wouldn’t probe even if he knew she was holding back. How could she discuss something she couldn’t even put into words to herself? And what if she was wrong? After all, it wasn’t really her problem until—*if*—Antony actually said something. Was it?

And besides, he had said he was considering becoming a monk. It was all very well having notions about an Anglican priest who happened to lecture on church history in a theological college—not that she was willing to admit to any such feelings, of course. But if she did have any and then he chose the religious life...

“No, nothing else. I’ve already taken too much of your time. Thank you, Father.” She rose and hurried out. Should she have asked him to bless her? Would he have been expecting her to make her confession? She wished she knew more of the forms of this Alice Through The Looking Glass world she had entered almost by accident.

As she made her way through the tangled passageways of the monastery back toward the college, the lengthy skirt of her black cassock—regulation student wear—wrapped itself around her long legs, impeding the speed of her stride, but she still managed to move fast enough to make her golden hair in its characteristic braid bump against her back. Thoughts tumbled through her mind. She had been so certain Father Oswin could help her. Their little talks always helped. And he had given fairly concrete advice—as concrete as he ever did. So why was she even more confused than when she started?

*Perhaps, a little voice niggled at the back of her mind, because you didn’t discuss the whole picture. But how could I? There isn’t anything to discuss. And I would look such a fool if I’m wrong.* She shut the door on that train of thought.

What about Father Oswin’s suggestion that she take a sort of mini personal pilgrimage? She had heard others talking about making Lenten retreats. It seemed to be part of the system—the accepted thing. Why shouldn’t she? Visit some convents. Get some practical idea of what she was really contemplating for her future. She had vaguely thought that the past seven months she had spent essentially living in a monastery as a student would have been preparation enough, but perhaps she

did need to see a wider picture.

It made such excellent sense, really. So why did she feel reluctant to undertake what should be a very pleasant break? A few days in each convent, just getting the feel of the place. Meet a few nuns—the sort of women she would be living with. As Father Oswin said, it wouldn't be a real discernment process, but enough to get the lie of the land, so to speak.

She would have to get permission to miss two lectures, but if she said it was at the advice of her spiritual director, it would surely be allowed. She had intended to finish her essay on the early sacramentaries and get started on her Old Testament paper, but they weren't really due yet. That wasn't the problem. Why was she who was always ready to go and to do suddenly reluctant to leave Kirkthorpe?

Still without an answer, she headed toward the common room where her fellow ordinands would be gathering before evening prayers, reading tattered copies of *The Church Times* or *The Church of England Newspaper*, depending upon their churchmanship, and sharing the latest gossip or debating the latest controversy in the church. But first, she would just stop by her pigeonhole and check her mail—or post, as she was becoming accustomed to saying.

The usual notices: cantor tryouts for Holy Week services, workers needed for the weekly youth night at the St James centre in town, sign up for day out to Rievaulx Abbey... And a letter. A real, written-on-paper, put-in-an-envelope letter. With a stamp bearing an American flag. Must be from her father, Andrew Howard, a soft-spoken man who worked for the state of Idaho as an employment counselor, but whose main role had always been to keep the family ticking along while his lawyer wife worked an eighty-hour minimum week.

Just holding this tangible contact from home gave her a sensation of warmth. She started to rip it open when the bell sounded for evening prayers. She stuck it in her pocket with the

wry thought that delaying pleasure was good for the soul, and made her way into the early April evening. Swathes of brilliant daffodils at her feet and birds chirping in the overhanging branches cheered her every step up the hill to the church as the bell continued to peal from the tower.

*Oh, yes, yes, yes. Peace and beauty. This was what she loved. This was what she wanted for the rest of her life.* She would obey and undertake the obligatory discernment, but there was really no need. She *knew*.

Inside the cool stone arches of the Community church, the ever-lingering scent of incense greeted her and the ancient quiet enfolded her. She turned to the side aisle to make her reverence to the icon of Our Lady of the Transfiguration, as was customary.

Her eyes were still adjusting to the dim light as she bowed her head and crossed herself, then raised her eyes to look into the gentle face she knew so well: the Madonna with her head tilted gently toward her infant Son, whose hand was raised in blessing and pointing to the background scene of Christ on the mountain top with Moses and Elijah. Felicity always loved the way the candlelight on the glowing gold background seemed to propel the dark-veiled Virgin and Child toward the votary, and the flickering light could seem to make the Transfigured Lord shimmer as he must have done to the astounded disciples seeing him in his transformed glory.

But no tender scene of Mother and Son met her uplifted eyes. This time only the bare stone column stared back at her. The votive candle on the small shelf was cold. Only a smudge of smoke on the stone attested that it had ever been lit.

Puzzled and disappointed, Felicity turned to her seat in choir and opened her prayer book. As every Friday in Lent, the evening Psalm was 22, “My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me:” the precentor set the first line of chant. As if taking a deep breath, the entire Community paused for the

caesura, then Felicity joined the response “and art so far from my cry?”

But her mind only half-followed the familiar words and rhythms. It was almost three weeks yet until the Maundy Thursday ritual stripping of the church as if preparing a body for burial, followed by the Holy Saturday church cleaning when she had been told every student turned out to clean every dark corner, polish every crucifix and candlestick, and dust every carved crevice as an important part of the ancient pattern of Holy Week. And, wasn't it the week before that—the week they called Passiontide—when all statues and images would be removed or veiled? Felicity was new to all this high church ritual she had taken to so suddenly and so wholeheartedly, but she was quite sure she had the information right. Why, then, was the icon gone now? Perhaps they had removed it early to be sent away for professional cleaning? Or perhaps she needed repair, although Felicity hadn't noticed any damage on the vibrant image.

Bowing, kneeling and chanting with the collected college and Community, Felicity was soon swept upward with the echoing prayers and wafting incense until, offering a final bow to the altar cross, she left her seat, walking beside Neville Mortara, the friend and ordinand who sat next to her. Neville turned aside to reverence the icon, but Felicity stopped him. “Don't bother,” she whispered. “She's gone.”

“Gone?” Neville's blue eyes startled beneath his gold-rimmed glasses, “Gone where?”

Felicity shrugged. “Cleaning, I suppose.”

Neville shook his head. “She didn't need cleaning.” He spoke with the authority of one who knew his field. Neville had achieved considerable success as an artist before coming to CT, as the College of the Transfiguration was familiarly known to its members, to study for the priesthood.

At the door Neville dipped a long, white finger into the

holy water stoop and offered his hand to share it with Felicity. The gold of his signet ring glowed dully as Felicity extended her hand. Together they crossed themselves and went out into the April evening.

Felicity smiled and looked up to continue chatting with Neville as they walked back down the hill to the refectory. It was unusual for Felicity, who stood slightly over five foot ten inches in her stockinged feet, to be obliged to crane her neck for a conversation. The breeze whipped at their long black cassocks, and Felicity had the impression of the reed-like Neville swaying with the branches around them.

But it wasn't the gust of wind that disturbed Felicity's comfort. Neville, whose generous friendship made him the easiest person she knew to chat with, seemed oddly distracted today. "Is something wrong, Neville?"

He looked startled. "Why do you say that? What should be wrong?" His brow furrowed under his pale fringe.

Before Felicity could answer they were joined by Neville's friend Maurice Paykel, waving the latest issue of *Inclusive*. "Nev, Have you *seen* this? A big rally at Manchester Cathedral—" The stocky redhead bore Felicity's companion away and she at last had a moment to open her father's letter.

The breeze riffled the page as she pulled it from the envelope. Then she stopped dead in the middle of the stone path. "Oh, sorry," she said to the group behind her, and stepped aside. Blinking, she looked back at the paper in her hand. *Not* from her father. Her *mother* had written her a letter. On paper. By hand. When was the last time her mother had done such a thing? Birthday cards "to our darling Felicity, love, Mother and Dad" had always been written by her father. "Have a happy day, Muffin" notes in her school lunch box had always been from her father. Forms for summer camp to be filled out and signed by parent were signed in Andrew Howard's neat script. What on earth could have spurred the fast-moving, high-tech Cynthia

to put pen to paper? An email would have been shocking, but believable. Just. A letter was frightening.

And Felicity was right to be alarmed. Her stomach tightened and her breathing stopped as she read. Cynthia's law firm had joined one of the new international firms. She had a choice of joining the firm in Los Angeles or in London. "Of course, I could stay in Boise, but there seems little point in that with Jeff's consultancy job taking him to Asia all the time and Charlie and Judy settled in the Silicone Valley and your father and I getting a divorce..."

Felicity gave an audible gasp as she backed into a tree for support. Had she read that right? She smoothed the crumpled paper and looked again. Yes, there was no mistaking. That was what it said.

"Oh, how typical! Can you believe it?" She exploded with disgusted anger to no one in particular.

"Believe what?"

She turned to the rich tenor voice behind her. "Oh, Antony." She thrust the crumpled sheet at Antony with an angry growl as if he had written it. "My mother! How could she? How could she be so—so—oh, I don't know." *Stupid. Uncaring. Pigheaded. Impulsive. Rash. Selfish.* Words whirled through her head too fast to enunciate.

Antony looked up from a quick perusal of the sheet. "Your parents are divorcing?"

"You noticed? My father doesn't bother to write at all and my mother finally gets around to mentioning it as an aside. A postscript after discussing *her* job and what's a convenient place for *her* to live. I mean, no one pretended it was an ideal marriage. But they're *my* parents. They live together. At home. What is she thinking?"

"And she's coming to see you."

"*What?*" Felicity stepped forward and snatched the paper back. She hadn't read the concluding paragraph. "... Sunday,

week after next, so we can have a nice visit before I look over the London office.” Felicity shook her head. “A ‘nice visit.’ When did we ever have a *nice visit*? Why should we start now?”

“Um, Felicity,” Antony ran his fingers upward through his thick dark hair, then flattened it again with a downward stroke. “Did you see the date on this?” He held out the envelope. “It took this two weeks to get here. She’ll be here tomorrow.”

Felicity threw her hands in the air. “I can’t believe she didn’t have the sense to ring or email. But fine. She can come whenever she wants to. It’s a free country and all that. But I won’t be here.” If she had had any doubts about leaving, this settled the matter.

When Antony didn’t reply, she continued, “I’m going on retreat. Rempstone. To test my vocation. Father Oswin’s orders. Oh, and I’ll be missing your church history lecture on Monday.”

A far corner of Felicity’s mind registered the fact that all color drained from Antony’s face when she mentioned testing her vocation. She supposed she could have broken it to him more gently, but now it was out. Just as well. She certainly didn’t need another complication to her life.

“We need to talk, Felicity.” Antony spoke in a tight voice.

“I don’t want to talk about it. Not now.” *Maybe never.*

He gave a jerky nod. “All right. But what I meant was that I need to talk to you. I’ve just come from Father Anselm’s office.”

Hearing the name of the Father Superior of the Community immediately took Felicity back to that day just a few weeks ago that now seemed like another world when she had so blithely started out with Antony to solve Father Dominic’s murder. Little could she have foreseen then what a different person she would be now.

“He’s asked me to undertake another investigation,”



Antony said.

“Not another murder?” Felicity blanched and her voice rose in alarm.

“No, no. Nothing so dramatic. Our Lady of the Transfiguration has disappeared.”

“Oh, I noticed she was gone. I thought she’d been sent out for cleaning or something.”

“Sadly, nothing that easily explained, I’m afraid.”

“Why don’t they call the police?”

“Father Anselm suspects—well, shall we say an inside job? He’d rather have it handled quietly.”

“He wouldn’t suspect one of the brethren. That must mean a student. I don’t believe it. Not even as a prank, surely.”

“I suppose a prank is a possibility. But I think he had something more specific in mind. A well-known artist and collector who might have reason to—well, er, borrow her for closer study?”

Felicity was outraged. “You mean Neville. What an absurd accusation! We were talking about it just a minute ago. I’m the one who told him the icon was missing. I’m certain he didn’t know anything about it. Besides, he’s one of the most honest people I know.”

Antony shrugged. “Well, I have to follow up. If it’s returned quietly that will be the end of it.”

“Why doesn’t the superior ask around himself?”

“He wants the whole business kept low-key. The thing is, a representative of the Patriarch of Moscow is coming for the Triduum.”

“To Kirkthorpe? For Holy Week? Oh, is that part of your ecumenical thingy?”

“In a way. Our icon was Russian—said to have been brought to England by Peter the Great on his Great Embassy in the seventeenth century. The Russian Orthodox Church has made enquiries about our loaning it for a special celebration

this year. Some anniversary of the Christianizing of Russia or something. Anyway, it seemed like a great opportunity to build bridges between our churches.”

“Oh, I get it. And so this emissary of his holiness shows up here in less than three weeks and we’ve mislaid the icon. Not good for ecumenical relations, to say the least.”

“That’s it exactly. And Father Anselm said that I—we—did so well last time, he was hoping...”

Felicity shook her head. “Sorry. My plate is more than full. But good luck and all that.” She turned and started walking rapidly toward the dining hall, no matter how little she fancied the Friday night Lenten vegetarian fare that would be awaiting her. Then she paused. “I mean it. Really. Good luck.”

Just before the path curved downhill she hesitated once more. “I’m off for Rempstone on the first train in the morning.” She flung it over her shoulder, telling herself she didn’t care whether he heard her or not. But when she allowed herself a brief backward glimpse she was struck by his bruised look.

## Chapter 2

### *Later that Evening*

Antony shut his eyes against the pain. Vocation? Did he hear rightly? Felicity was going to a convent to test her vocation? Felicity wanted to be a nun?

What a bitter irony. Just when he had concluded that he wasn't called to be a monk. Oh, the stories of St Francis offering refuge and spiritual counseling to St Clare and their lifelong friendship, each forming religious orders and supported by their correspondence, were inspiring reading, but not at all how he had pictured what he had come to hope would be his life with this brilliant, impulsive, stunning, infuriating young woman who had turned his world upside down.

He had been aware of her deepening maturity since they returned to Kirkthorpe from their recent harrowing adventure, but he had no idea... Antony berated himself. What was he thinking? He should be thrilled for her. That someone who had been so new to spiritual things could have been drawn so deeply into the faith that quickly...

And yet, the other side of his mind argued that this had to be another one of Felicity's hare-brained, impulsive leaps. Or was that wishful—selfishly wishful—thinking on his part?

He only knew he couldn't leave it at that. He would make one more attempt to talk to her tonight after supper, before the Greater Silence began. He had to get through to her. Instead of continuing on toward the dining hall he turned back to the quiet of the church.

Two hours later he found her just leaving the common room after coffee hour. She made no objection as he fell into

step beside her. They walked down the hall in silence but once outside in the cold, damp evening air, Antony cleared his throat, praying he could get this right.

“Felicity, there’s no reason you should do this for me, but Father Anselm specifically asked, and he did seem so worried.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know anything about icons. Get Neville to help you. He’s always ready to help everybody and what better way to investigate him? And doesn’t he have an uncle who works for the Victoria and Albert or something?”

Antony nodded. “Right. Fine. I’ll check that out. See, you’ve been a help already.” He tried to force a casual smile.

Of course he was failing miserably at any attempt to seem offhand. He knew he was always too intense. He could almost feel Felicity gritting her teeth at the implication that she should continue helping—confirmation that he was botching the whole thing—but he went on, “Right. Forget the icon. But really, Felicity, the far more serious matter is your mother—”

“Whoa!” Felicity held up her hand. “Don’t. You don’t know anything about it. It’s none of your business.”

“No, I don’t know anything about your situation. But I do know something about being without a mother.” The last thing he wanted was to get sentimental, but he couldn’t help remembering the dark night in a rain-whipped bus kiosk in Northumbria when he had told her about the death of his parents in a sailing accident and his dreary, isolated childhood.

Apparently Felicity was recalling the same scene because she took a breath of air as if she would speak, but no words came. He sensed a momentary softening in her. It was enough to give him courage to press on. “Felicity, the day after tomorrow is Mothering Sunday. Couldn’t you...”

Whatever he was about to suggest, and he wasn’t at all sure what it was, was cut off by her vigorous head-shaking. “I said, don’t go there. You want a mother—you can have her. She was never a mother to me, and now she’s leaving my father and

I'm supposed to change my life for her because she suddenly decides maybe she needs me?"

Antony threw out his hands in a helpless gesture. "All right. I get it. You're hurt and angry and you dislike your mother—"

"Dislike her? I don't dislike her. I don't know her well enough to have an opinion. I'm indifferent."

"Did she mistreat you?"

"No. She was never there enough to mistreat us."

"Hmm, so I wonder why she had children."

Antony spoke without thinking, but he could see that his words stunned Felicity.

After a long silence she said, "I have no idea. I never thought about it." And that was the end of the subject.

Antony could think of nothing more to say, so in the end he fell back on the practical. He offered to meet her mother's train which was scheduled to arrive several hours after Felicity had embarked for the Community of the Holy Cross outside a tiny village in Nottinghamshire.

The incongruity of Felicity joining an enclosed community of sisters that still wore traditional habits and spent their days in prayer left him speechless. He stood rooted as Felicity strode down the path and out of the high, black iron gate to her apartment. Would he ever see her again? Of course he would. But whatever change was about to take place in their lives, he knew things would never be the same again.