

The Parish Assistant.

The phone rang.

'Brand Thoroughgood speaking, how can I help?' said the tall gaunt man in bicycle clips with greying hair and three heavy pullovers below his grey dog collar.

'Hi there, it's me, Mel Thursday, a-ready and a-waiting honey,' gushed the voice, warm and breathy with a Dixie twang.

'I'm very sorry Ms Thursday, I think there has been some mistake. This is the Reverend Merlin Brand Thoroughgood, Craigloannie Parish Church.'

'Yes, you're the very one I'm here for honey, come on over and git me, I'm all yours for as long as you want me.'

'Is this about Car Insurance again? I told you people last time, I don't have a car. I live a frugal life here ...'

'No honey it's the SCOL Project, as per the email.'

'I don't do emails.'

'Shit! That stupid bitch Alania at the SBU, I could tell she was a dope, wasp-waist, big tits and no brain.'

'Now please, there is no need for...'

'You sure ya don't know about SCOL? Serving Christ in Other Lands? No? Well it's your lucky day cos here I am, honey, all yours for as long as you need me, all for free, just bed and board, so turn down them sheets honey cos I'm a-comin' to ya, OK?'

'Look, Miss eh, I will report this, I am registered with TPS...'

'Lighten up Brand, OK? And call me Mel, for God's sake! If we are going to make this thing work we need to get the names right from the start, OK? I'll jump a cab, OK? But I don't have any of your pound things so you may need to pay if they don't take plastic, OK?'

'Now listen here young lady, I do NOT want whatever it is you are selling. Look, you are breaking the law of the land...'

But he was talking to silence.

The Parish Assistant.

He slumped back into his chair, sipping his coffee, staring out of the grimy window onto the bleak November landscape of this patch of Drumchapel that had been his Parish for twenty-seven years.

'What in Heaven's name was that about?' he said to the picture of his parents.

The Reverend Quinton Merlin Thoroughgood glared back in scolding silence and, as always, Isabella Euphemia *nee* Brand, known to everyone as 'Mother', scowled in filial unison.

Brand grimaced; on marriage they had, as the Bible suggested, become as one person, indivisible in their thinking, coincident in their opinions, unable to disguise that he, the only product of their loins, was an abject disappointment.

Lifting the phone he made a start, checking on his elderly flock.

Susie rolled over and yawned, then began her mid-morning grooming ritual, licking her paw and washing behind her ear.

'Praise the Lord! Praise the Giver of all Good things! Hallelujah! Aha-men!' screeched Garrot the Parrot, head-bobbing from the top of his cage as he deposited a large dollop of stinking guano onto the pile of 'Life and Work' magazines.

Susie bounded across Brand's desk, leaping at Garrot who hopped onto the curtains and scuttled upwards to safety.

'Fuck Off ya wee shite! Polly take yer knickers aff! Aw fur fuck's sake, no again!'

'Dear God, please take Garrot to that place that You have set aside for such creatures. Amen,' muttered Brand, reiterating his frequent prayer which, like many others, had so far fallen on God's deaf ear.

The parrot had been left to Brand by a long-gone parishioner whose husband had been a non-believer. The man had delighted in teaching the bird his version of shipyard humour.

The Parish Assistant.

Brand moved out of the Living Room which served as his Vestry, and Study. This crowded room still had the vivid purple anaglypta wallpaper so loved by its previous tenant. In the small dingy kitchen he tidied up from previous night. He ate only once a day now.

For the thousandth time he regretted agreeing to the sale of the original Manse in the leafy suburbs of Jordanhill, making himself and his then wife homeless, using the money to fund a new roof for the jerry-built post-war church building.

As a consequence Brand Thoroughgood he had become a council tenant, deposited in this run-down three-bedroomed terraced house, the new Manse, a five minute walk from the still crumbling dismal church.

Selling the Jordanhill Manse had been a reckless act of faith, Jasmine had spat at him before leaving, divorcing him six months later.

And so here Brand had endured alone for next twenty-three years, praying nightly for deliverance, like a Daniel trapped in a cold damp den.

He emptied the ready-meal containers into the bin, rinsed his knife, fork and spoon and put them on the rack. He had long since decided to eat directly from the packaging. Should he allow himself another proper coffee now, or wait for an instant coffee at the Old Folks' Lunch Club, he asked himself.

The doorbell rang.

'It's open,' he called back.

A short black woman in a pink track suit stood on the step beside two enormous suitcases.

The logo on her top announced: 'Southern Baptist Union of Alabama'.

Her face spread into a wide smile.

'Glory be Brand, are you not just the cutest boy in the whole of Scotland!'

She rushed forwards, throwing her arms around him, smothering him in kisses.