

Resurrection and Renewal

A Collection of Stories

by

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The Great Man Eats

The man relished those hearty meals.

Khloe had watched him, in a single sitting, consume 64-ounce steaks cooked medium rare with multiple loaded baked potatoes, salad and rich chocolate desserts heaped on platters - with a half-gallon of wine, no less - for decades, first as the daughter of the restaurant's owner, then as proprietor herself.

He visited the establishment whenever he traveled to the city, sometimes with advance warning, others on the spur of the moment. A round corner table was always kept at the ready, for that reason, with clean linen and the finest silver place setting.

Customers periodically questioned this practice, especially during the dinner rush when waits topped an hour. Khloe would just smile.

As she had smiled the day she met the great man.

She'd never spent much time in the restaurant as a child, being occupied at home or in school. Her mother's unexpected death of untreated cancer, however, changed everything.

Khloe's father could not take weeks to grieve his loss, and babysitters were at a premium during the war. So, he brought the girl - only nine - to the restaurant, where she could play with her toys in relative seclusion of his office.

With the curiosity of the young, she'd peeked through the window in the door when she overheard the kitchen staff creating a racket that particular evening. She watched as they grilled the huge steak and prepared the meal with extra attention to detail, then tracked the waiter as he traversed the dining room with the tray balanced over his head.

The platter steaming, crystal wine glass filled with a dry red vintage, the man glanced up to see the cherubic face staring at him.

Plenty of reason to stare, too, from Khloe's viewpoint. He resembled an overgrown teenager with curly dark hair and fresh features. She subsequently learned he was barely 21. When he signaled to her with a long, elegant index finger, she risked opening the door, quickly closing it when she noticed her father glaring at the breach of decorum.

Two minutes fearing a scolding were dispelled by a summons to the table. Timidly, she shuffled across the carpet, chided by the maitre d' to "Straighten up and be polite."

Joined by her father, she was introduced to the already-famous gentleman. She dropped a curtsy and he extended his right hand. A massive paw, by which her diminutive appendage might have been crushed when she laid it on his palm.

Gallantly, he bent and kissed her fingers.

She giggled, and he laughed, a thunderous noise causing other patrons to pause mid-bite.

He invited her to sit on the chair beside him and, when her father nodded consent, she climbed onto a red velvet cushion, blue eyes wide at the way the man shoveled huge chunks of meat into his mouth.

“You must have a hollow leg,” she’d chirped.

An ear-splitting guffaw, and the start of a life-long relationship.

Professional relationship, nothing more. Khloe continued to be his dinner companion, if he didn’t bring his friends along for a meal. Even when those... moochers, she termed them, would take advantage of his generosity, they always left as soon as they cleaned their plates for more exciting entertainment, leaving him to pay the check.

He didn’t seem to mind pandering to the leeches, and she would clear the dishes prior to taking her traditional place to discuss the latest news.

The afternoon he announced his move west, Khloe was celebrating her fifteenth birthday, his presence merely a coincidence. While she’d already noticed his girth increasing, she still had a terrible crush on him, and she was heartbroken.

He detected her tears. “Is it because I didn’t bring you a present?” he whispered, towering over her.

Her ponytail shook sideways, face hidden behind a napkin.

“What about a dance?” he suggested. “Your father tells me you like to dance.”

Khloe sniffed, “I... want to be a ballerina, if that’s what you mean.”

“Can a ballerina waltz?”

She nodded.

He crossed to the juke box installed after the war. Most of the songs were jazz, but a few appealed to mature tastes.

When the music began, he returned and bowed politely. Feeling very much like a little girl, she took his hand and allowed him to guide her between the tables, for lack of a real dance floor.

“I won’t be gone forever,” he promised, the top of her head barely reaching his chin. He gazed at her with intense hazel orbs and smiled, causing her to mirror the expression. “I’ll be back and forth on a regular basis, so I’ll still be stopping in for dinner.”

As the song ended, he kissed her forehead.

She didn’t wash her face for a week after that.

Khloe did get over her infatuation with him as boys her own age flocked around, primarily because they could eat free when they called on her by the

restaurant's kitchen entrance. She soon discovered their ploy and rejected them roundly, leaving her without a date for the high school's senior prom.

Working as a waitress poured salt in the wound, as many of her classmates chose to dine at the restaurant before heading to that night's dance. Unable to control her disappointment, she fled to her father's office at one point, where she found a lovely lavender gown hanging on the hook behind the door.

"What's this?" she muttered as he placed a stack of bills in the safe.

"Your prom dress. You'd better get ready."

"But, I'm not..."

She could tell, by his kindly mien, he'd made alternative plans.

"Are you taking me?" she pressed.

That distinctive voice almost made her jump out of her skin. "I am, if you'll have me."

She hadn't seen him in months, and he'd gained more weight, but still looked impressive in a black tuxedo. He presented her with an orchid corsage. "Hurry, now. We'll be late."

The stares of the stragglers just finishing their meals as she paraded through the dining room on his arm were priceless.

She still had that orchid, pressed between the pages of her yearbook, which featured their photo as prom king and queen.

Weeks later, Khloe's father died when a pallet of vegetables shifted and fell off the delivery truck, pinning him underneath. The entire city shared the girl's mourning, with hundreds attending the funeral.

A pall hung over the man's next visit to the restaurant. "I'm sorry I wasn't here..."

"You were in France on business, I know. I read it in the paper," Khloe grinned weakly.

They sat at the table, chatting, while he ate his traditional fare. He inquired about her plans for college.

"That's all done. This will be my career," she sighed.

"It's a very... lucrative career."

"Very time consuming. I'm having the second floor done over as an apartment, just so I can be close to the action."

"You could always sell..."

She'd considered the possibility, and discarded it.

His visits became less frequent as he aged and grew more rotund. Yet, as soon as he appeared on the threshold, the months - the years - melted away, and they were two friends enjoying each other's company.

Khloe never married; she had no strength to stretch herself between the restaurant and a spouse. Her best-known customer, though, went through three marriages, at least.

He never brought those women to the restaurant, and Khloe wondered if he thought they would spoil the ambiance. Or, if they would chastise him for the amount of food and wine he ingested.

Maybe, he just enjoyed the peace and quiet of a well-cooked meal and convivial conversation, without the pressure of being a public figure.

Toward the end, the pair could sit for hours without one other patron approaching to request an autograph or some tidbit of wisdom from his lips. He'd doubled in size from those early days, and Khloe wondered if the younger folk simply didn't recognize him. It soothed her, nonetheless, as he spoke candidly about his joys and sorrows, knowing she understood and did not judge.

Pulling a ten-penny nail from between her teeth, she secured black crepe material to the stucco wall with a hammer. That corner table would be a permanent shrine to his memory.

A Shock to the System

In those silent moments while the priest cleaned the sacred vessels at the altar, Cara tried to silence her over-active mind.

Her to-do list never shortened, working 60 hour weeks as she did. Simple tasks, all, but the idea of being “caught up” and having a well-deserved rest lay far beyond the horizon.

“Mass is ended, go in peace,” proclaimed the greying elder, with his bushy beard and mustache adding to the impression of a Jedi knight above white vestments and cassock.

A weary congregation filed from the Gothic structure, except Cara. She approached the sanctuary and strode over worn beige carpet to the sacristy door, where Fr. Lucius struggled to hang his chasuble in the closet.

“I’ll take care of that,” the woman whispered, freeing the bulky, embroidered garment from gnarled hands.

“Thanks.”

Not bothering with an apron to prevent her floral-print summer dress from getting wet, she remained to wash the dishes in a more thorough manner when the pastor fled through the rear door and into the privacy of the adjacent rectory. His near-hatred of the faithful - albeit dwindling - flock puzzled her.

Many aspects of daily life puzzled Cara. Nearing 30, she presumed she would understand more about people, about their dreams, desires, their goals. She lived simply in a one-bedroom apartment on the south side of the moderately-sized metropolis, yet could not escape the greed, ambition and prejudice to which others gave free reign.

As she dried the jewel-encrusted chalice with a tea towel, her musings were interrupted by thumping bass rhythms beyond the arched stained glass windows. The noise smacked of disrespectful, mid-morning on a Sunday.

Peering through the peephole in the door, a distorted view of a scene on the opposite corner failed to clarify the situation. A tall, dark-haired figure stood on the neighborhood pawn shop’s steps, shouting over the music to a crowd gathered on the sidewalk.

He pulled a rope, unfurling a banner which read, “Under New Ownership.”

In the years she’d lived in the city, Cara understood such businesses - along with car dealerships and liquor stores - closed on Sunday.

This unconventional activity drew a sigh from her lips. She hung the towel on a brass ring beside the sink and made her way through the now-dim edifice, collection counters recording the weekly take at a folding table in the narthex.

“Have a good afternoon, Cara,” called one blue-haired grandmother.

“You, too.”

The heavy wooden door opened with creaking hinges and she emerged into the sunlight, blinking against the glare off a parked car’s windshield.

Temperature pleasant with a mild breeze, the woman didn’t need to tie her reddish-brown tresses in a pony tail for the stroll homeward. Instead of crossing the street, however, she avoided the bustling corner, her stride purposeful as she progressed down the block.

The pawn shop proprietor’s basso profundo reached her ears, nonetheless. “All electronics, 40 percent off for the next hour only! Lawn mowers, 30 percent off! Everything must go! All guitars - electric or acoustic - 80 percent off!”

Cara exhaled slowly. She’d ached to buy a guitar for years, since selling her father’s instrument after his death a decade earlier. She hadn’t been able to save enough to splurge on such a luxury, always managing to need the funds to pay for some emergency or other.

At an 80% discount, she might acquire a fine six-string inexpensively, and be able to join the church’s rock choir.

Not that she had time to attend their weeknight rehearsals, she remonstrated.

Still, it wouldn’t hurt to look at the pawn shop’s selection.

She halted at the crosswalk, deliberating whether to proceed to the apartment and cook pancakes for a late breakfast, or indulge herself a tiny bit.

Retracing her route, she wound between cars slowed by the assembly overflowing onto the street, hesitant to venture into the press.

Shouts hawking his wares faded mid-syllable as the pawn shop owner swiveled squarish features toward Cara. Customers filed in and out the narrow entrance, a bell suspended from the lintel tinkling repeatedly.

“Come in, come in!” the owner resumed. “Find yourself a bargain or two!”

He ducked into the gloomy structure, overhead fluorescent lighting insufficient. When Cara finally managed to squeeze past the crush, she saw no guitars among the small appliances, cameras, jewelry and lawn equipment on display.

A harried clerk glanced over the shoulder of a teenager paying for his video game. “May I help you?”

“Where are the guitars?” Cara asked.

A distracted finger pointed toward a curtained alcove.

“Thanks.”

Traversing an obstacle course might have proven easier, Cara chuckled to herself as she dodged bodies, boxes and bags. Using one finger to draw aside a red velvet curtain, her jaw gaped at the collection of brass, woodwinds, drums and guitars in a room equal to the size of the main showroom.

She slipped over the threshold, alone in the strangely quiet chamber. As she studied each guitar, she noticed the wall covering behind the suspended rack. Sound proof material had been installed at some point, and a tarp-covered sound board in the far corner suggested the space had once been used as a recording studio.

Timid digits reached for a Fender model.

“Let me help you with that.” The booming voice made Cara jump, and she recoiled as the towering figure neared.

No threat tinged the owner’s words. She detected a weak smile on his thin lips.

“There’s a security system,” he explained, using an oddly-shaped key to loose the guitar’s neck from its perch.

He presented her the instrument but, so flustered, she nearly dropped it.

“I’m sorry. I scared you,” he apologized.

She stammered an incoherent reply.

Studying him, Cara equated his appearance to a large brick - his torso - set atop two long legs, and topped by a smaller brick, crowned with curly black hair, wide sideburns and a bushy mustache. His shoulders were angular, his face the same, chin lowered while deep set brown orbs scrutinized her from a three-quarter pose.

She retreated, wishing the walls would absorb her entirely.

“Do you play, or is this a gift for your husband?” he queried.

“I... used to play. It’s been a long time.”

“Such lovely hands shouldn’t be marred by the callouses steel strings require. I suggest nylon...”

He moved toward the classical guitars; she remained in place, managing to strum a chord before retuning the B string.

“You really should...”

“Nylon strings don’t have the same sound,” she objected. “As for callouses... who’s to care?”

What happened then, Cara would yearn to recall clearly in subsequent days.

The owner scooped up her left hand to examine the skin, leaving her to hold the guitar by the neck with her right. Immediately, lights flickered and failed, the curtain billowed as if a strong wind had blown through the building.

Screams emanated from the front room as lightning crackled and thunder shook the foundation.

Hail pummeled the metal roof, creating its own syncopated beat; rain poured from clouds, formed in a sky which had been sunny and blue only moments previous.

Electrical current shot from the wall sockets, criss-crossing the chamber and converging on the joined appendages.

Cara awoke, sprawled on a battered green sofa in unfamiliar surroundings. She bolted off the cushions, thinking she'd had a bad dream.

Dizziness overwhelmed her and she sank back, her head pounding.

Hazel eyes could not focus on the image carrying a glass of water toward her. Not the man she had dealt with in the pawn shop...

"Where... am I?" she croaked.

"The rectory."

Fr. Lucius' unmistakable tenor.

"How'd..."

"I can't explain it, myself. The sudden storm, and a direct lightning strike on the pawn shop. Ambulances came from every hospital in a 30 mile radius to tend the injured."

"Injured? How many?"

"Twenty. Thirty. The shop was packed."

Slowly, Cara sat upright. "Then, what am I doing here?"

"You were the last. In the back room. I guess no one thought to look there, because it was so dark."

"But, you..."

"I'd seen you go into the shop while I was watering my plants on the front porch. I didn't see them carry you out, so I went in after they were gone."

"What about... the owner?"

"The big guy? He was nowhere to be found." He raised her hands and cupped them around the tumbler. "Drink this."

Before the glass touched her mouth, she broke down in sobs.

"You really should go to the hospital," Lucius advised.

"I can't afford it," she gasped.

"You might be hurt worse than you know. Lightning strikes can be deadly."

"I'll... be... fine. Just... give me... a minute or two."

Cara departed the rectory ten minutes later under her own power, yet far from fine. She'd been shaken to her core by an unknown force, and it had nothing to do with lightning.

Plywood boards had already been secured over the pawn shop's front windows, and wisps of smoke could be seen rising from the partially collapsed roof.

So much for new ownership.

Cara hoped the building and contents were insured.

She'd have to look elsewhere for a guitar, someday.

Settled in her apartment after shedding her smoke-stained dress for a blue terry bathrobe, she forgot about breakfast and skipped lunch. Her stomach in knots, she curled up on the twin bed and cried herself to sleep.

By chance, she saw a copy of Monday morning's newspaper when she arrived at the office downtown. The National Weather Service had confirmed Sunday's freak, spontaneous storm which struck, then dissipated just as quickly as it formed. The pawn shop was ruled a total loss, but the reporter could not reach the owner for comment.

He'd vanished just like the storm, so had all his employees, Cara learned, untraceable through any state or federal database.

Within a month of the incident, the entire block of structures across from St. Vincent's Church had been demolished. The tale grew stranger and stranger, when local Code Enforcement officials revealed the properties had been condemned for more than a year.

Cara began to doubt her sanity. If the pawn shop had been vacated prior to that particular Sunday, then why... and who...

She stopped eating, living on coffee and peanut butter sandwiches, when she made the effort to break out bread and a knife. Her drastic weight loss was noticed by co-workers - she claimed no friends - and the bearded Dominican Fr. Lucius.

"I did some investigating," the priest mentioned, lingering in the sacristy after Sunday Mass, rather than dashing from the church, as per usual.

"About what?" Cara responded as she rinsed the cruets.

"The pawn shop."

She stiffened and cringed.

"You're not the only one who was curious. I live here, and I never saw a moving van, or any type of activity signaling a new business was moving in. That Saturday evening, when I went for my walk, the condemned sign was still plastered on the door. I remember it distinctly, being so bright red."

"And, Sunday morning?" Cara urged.

"I don't know. I went straight to the church to set up the lectionary and change the altar cloth."

"But, you saw the commotion after?"

“Heard it more than saw it,” Lucius admitted. “He didn’t need a bull horn with that powerful voice.”

“You didn’t see him?”

“Little more than a silhouette.”

“At least six-foot-four,” Cara recalled. “He reminded me of bricks stacked on top of each other, he was so... squarish. He wore all black: dress shirt with a little gold sunburst insignia, trousers and patent leather shoes. His hair was blacker than the fabric of his clothes...”

With her mention of black, Lucius’ complexion paled to a sickly white.

Cara spun, wiping the paten with a tea towel, and nearly dropped the gold plate. “What’s wrong, Father?”

Lucius shuffled to the counter, rummaging in a drawer for paper and pencil. He roughly sketched a face. “Is that the man?”

The woman blanched, gasping, “Yes.”

A litany of brief prayers issued from the priest’s lips.

“How do you know him?” Cara pressed.

“I don’t. I’ve never met him in my life. But, I’ve seen him...”

“Who is he?”

“I don’t know his name. He’s... not from these parts.”

Cara sank on a stool beside the vestment cupboard. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

With a few deep breaths, Lucius recovered his composure, crumpling the paper and tossing it in the wire trash basket. “Forget about it. Consider it a nightmare and get back to living your life.”

“A nightmare, in broad daylight?”

“It’s possible. All things are possible. Now, go. Light a candle before the Blessed Virgin, say a prayer and go get some lunch.”

“I’m... not hungry.”

“It’s a penance. You must eat a full meal at least three times a day until you gain back the weight you’ve lost,” Lucius instructed.

“This isn’t the confessional.”

“No matter. Do as I say. Deliberately starving yourself is a sin, after all.”

Dejected, Cara finished her chores and allowed the priest to hold the door for her as she made her exit. She’d hoped to find some answers when he reacted so vehemently to her description of the mysterious pawn shop owner, ending up with more questions.

A detour into City Hall on her lunch hour Monday accomplished nothing. No occupancy or business permit had been requested for the pawn shop address after Code Enforcement filed the condemned notice.

Whoever had pulled that stunt had done so illegally.

But, for what purpose?

All she could remember was fighting the crowd to find the guitars, and the imposing figure who caused her gaze to look almost heavenward as she admired the Fender acoustic...

After that, nothing, until she woke up in the rectory.

Long days working and frustrating, sleepless nights - coupled with not eating, despite Fr. Lucius' directive - wore on her health. She ached for some distraction from the daily grind; no television series or old movies held her attention, and wildlife seen during walks in the park didn't amuse her.

Filling her cup at the water cooler on a particularly hot Tuesday, Cara overheard one of the executives mention a new music store opening in a strip mall the company owned. The prospect of scoring a good price on a guitar - maybe the music would fill the void existing in her soul - prompted her to research the dates and hours.

Not being naive, Cara understood guitars were mass-produced, especially the inexpensive ones. To visit the music store and find a Fender acoustic identical to the one she'd wanted to buy at the pawn shop, however, rattled her confidence.

A wiry clerk unhooked the instrument from the rack when Cara asked the price. Holding it by the neck, she strummed a chord; the B string needed tuning.

She shuddered at the blast of memory.

Flipping the guitar so the backside was visible, she noticed black streaks on the wood-grain finish.

"Is this guitar used?" she wondered.

The clerk shrugged. "It's new, in a way. We got it at a fire sale."

The guitar bounced on the floor, Cara's fingers unable to retain her grip. Retrieving it, the clerk snarled, "If it's damaged, you'll have to pay for it..."

Cara had fled.

The pawn shop hadn't been part of a nightmare, the guitar she'd selected very real, indeed.

Doors locked, blinds drawn, Cara huddled on her bed that night, every nerve tingling. Her heart felt like it would explode, and her head throbbed unmercifully.

She wanted to pack her car and run, the sole factor stopping her being she didn't know where to run, or even if she could escape whatever metaphysical realm into which she had stumbled.

"Oh, dammit!" she wept to the bare walls. "What in hell is going on?"

Her strength exhausted, Cara eventually fell asleep propped against the scratched wooden backboard, hugging knees to her chest.

Until she felt another presence in the room. She didn't believe in ghosts, and if a burglar thought he would profit by rifling through her drawers...

Raising her eyes, she scanned the chamber, lit only by what streetlight penetrated the cheap plastic blinds. Framed in the doorway, a broad shadow hovered.

She didn't need to see his face. She knew - somewhere deep in her gut, she knew.

"Why are you here?" she hissed.

"I've been searching for you these many months," came the basso profundo.

"I'm not hard to find, for anyone who knows me."

"Except, I knew not your name, only that you at one time played the guitar."

"So, you traced me by the guitar?"

"I... was not involved in the fire sale."

"You weren't legally involved in the pawn shop!" Cara moaned.

"It was... a one-time opportunity."

"To achieve what?"

A single stride propelled him to the bed; he dropped onto the mattress. "Finding a kindred spirit, an unmistakable spark."

She shrank from his menacing yet magnetic presence. "What makes you think we're kindred spirits?"

"You have music in your soul, and the heart of a poet..."

"You strike me as a profiteering, greedy..."

He laughed, a booming blast which rattled the windowpanes. "You're missing the point. For many years, I have sought someone who can balance my... natural proclivities. I travel from place to place, setting up shop and selling my wares..."

"You had hundreds of people in the pawn shop that Sunday. Why pick on me?"

"Those who seek a quick bargain on a toaster oven or cheap jewelry have no inspiration of note. You were the one who ached for the music to return to your dull existence... You immediately knew the guitar needed tuning - as do I."

"So, what is it you want from me?"

"Come with me."

"Where?"

"Does it matter?"

“Of course, it does!”

He oozed, “Why? You have nothing here, no one...”

“And, what would I have with you?”

“Eternity.”

Cara grabbed her pillows, using them as a barrier. “I don’t even know your name. Go away, please.”

“Names mean nothing in the greater scheme of reality.”

“Bullshit.”

“You cannot deny...”

“I cannot deny your existence which, fortunately, means I can get back to my ordinary life. For weeks, I questioned whether you were a hallucination...” Suddenly, hunger overwhelmed her. She rose and moved toward the door, intent on a tall glass of chocolate milk.

“You cannot deny your destiny,” pursued her into the kitchen.

“I have no destiny. I’m just a cog in the wheel of futility.”

“You don’t need to be. Come with me.”

“I’ll ask again: where?”

“Wherever the winds take us.”

She paused in the process of opening the refrigerator as his powerful hands clamped on her shoulders. She could feel the heat he generated through her green flannel nightshirt.

“Let me go,” she breathed.

“Come with me.”

His lips almost touched her ear as he spoke, and she shivered at the sensation.

“Before I agree to anything, I’ve got to know how that storm...”

“Accidental, I assure you, and I offer my apologies. Captivated by your soul, I forgot myself momentarily. I did not expect the reaction to be so powerful.”

Could there be any other reply? she mused. “Where will we go? What will we do?”

“It’s not that simple...”

Fingers suspended above the refrigerator handle, Cara debated her options. She’d suffered so much since their original meeting, as if her essence had been ripped from inside her, leaving an empty shell. In this moment, she sensed he could complete her in some fashion not readily explicable in mere words.

She was, frankly, tired of eking out a living just to pay bills and buy food. If more could be had from 24 hours...

“What should I pack?” she stated.

“Not a thing.”

“We’ll buy what we need?”

“We’ll need nothing but each other.”

Cara ignored the confusion consuming her brain. “Fine. Take me. I’m yours.”

Maneuvering her to face him, captivating her with that same three-quarter pose and intense gaze, he extended his massive paw. Tentatively, she placed her diminutive digits upon his palm.

A repetition of the phenomena tore the apartment to shreds. Lightning and thunder, hurricane-force winds, hail and a downpour, surrounded and engulfed them.

When the firefighters sifted through the rubble the following morning, they found no trace of human remains.

That Sunday after Mass, Fr. Lucius had to wash the sacred vessels himself.

The Tau Tattoo

She should have suspected as much.

Once headlines captured the newspaper's front page, Alice Ward found herself a target - of other media outlets, and of those she'd exposed for their misdeeds.

Not that she believed they would accept the reports unchallenged. She had predicted, to the journalist with whom she entrusted the documents and information, they would do their utmost to discredit her, branding her a disgruntled employee, mentally ill or worse.

Bad enough, they were Franciscans, men vowed to poverty, chastity and obedience (or, as one friar had stated, "No money, no honey, no funny"), who didn't have the vaguest inclination of what St. Francis of Assisi meant when he composed his Rule of Life in the early 13th century. They lived in luxury, unlike the poor and marginalized they were supposed to serve. A sense of entitlement separated them from reality, coupled with a belief the laity's only purpose was to serve their every whim, and take what they dished out in silence.

Not Alice. Her totem animal a skunk, she took nothing from nobody. When one of the priests started uttering inappropriate comments about other's sexuality, insulting the culture of the Native Americans occupying his mission's church pews, mishandling parish funds and blatantly lying about his contacts with prestigious individuals... she wasn't going to sit back and watch.

His superiors "circled the wagons" - protecting their brother and throwing her under the bus. Through a calculated pattern of retaliation, intimidation and manipulation, she lost her home, her job, and a large chunk of her sanity.

Freed of their influence, she had no intention of letting them off scot-free. "When a victim remains silent," she rationalized, "the abusers retain their power."

She had kept every email, every letter, and notes on face-to-face conversations and meetings which the Franciscans had not recorded in any way. Contacting the local paper, she forwarded the documents *in toto* before leaving the state to assume the duties of her new position.

Her one mistake: providing a forwarding address for the Provincial Treasurer to mail her last paycheck.

Alice retired early after a full day of training, and responding to multiple emails about the bombshell. A light sleeper by nature, when the deadbolt on the apartment door scraped ominously, she jolted upright on the futon and listened.

She hit the carpet just as a bullet tore through the pillows.

The silencer prevented her neighbors from raising an alarm.

Limited light prevented the assailants from realizing they had missed their mark. Alice remained still in the shadows, observing them creep into the studio and close the door. The taller of the masked men pulled a flashlight from his pocket and switched it on. They intended to ransack the place, though she owned no valuable possessions.

Except the laptop computer on which the incriminating files were saved.

The woman's fingers groped for a heavy walking stick she used when hiking the foothills on weekends. Rising swiftly, she swung the solid wood like a baseball bat, knocking the closest intruder backward. He toppled over the end table and cracked his head on the wall, sinking unconscious in the corner.

Alerted to her presence, his partner aimed a blow in the darkness, missing Alice's face by inches. She thrust the walking stick between his legs and jerked upward. His piteous groan confirmed she had injured his vitals.

An old green glass vase shattered his skull as he dropped beside his cohort. Sirens in the distance reassured her someone in the complex - hearing the scuffle - had the good sense to alert police.

Alice switched on the table lamp, rapidly rummaging through the burglars' pockets. No wallets, no ID, just oversized brown hoodies and sweats.

And, on their collarbones beneath the fabric, a Tau tattoo.

How sacrilegious, she mused, for assassins to bear that beloved symbol.

She'd been wrong about the sirens: their annoying whine faded in the distance all too soon. While reaching for her cell phone to make the necessary call, she took her eyes off the pair, who escaped out the door.

"Damn!" she swore.

The sergeant and patrol officer who responded to the summons seemed little interested in her plight, until she showed them where the projectile had lodged in the plaster behind the futon. Since Alice could offer no real description beyond the two men's general size and weight, they promised only to pass along their report to the detective bureau.

"If you think you're in danger," remarked the senior upon departing, "you may want to move."

"I just moved in!" Alice protested.

He smirked and shrugged.

Her inner skunk revealed itself. "If you refuse to pursue this, I'll do it myself!"

Come daylight, she packed the laptop and drove to the nearest bank branch, renting a safe deposit box where the device was - she hoped - secure. The white Ford Fiesta's tank filled with gas at the convenience store next door, she steered toward the interstate, bound for her old stomping grounds.

Cruising west along Interstate 40, slightly exceeding the posted speed limit, Alice's internal radar registered no traffic patrols, but sensed the frequent reappearance of a red Dodge Ram pick-up in her rear view mirror as unusual. A beige Fiat 500 also seemed to be matching her route.

One of her mottos: "Drive like it's a Mustang." She and her older brother had restored a blue Mach II years earlier, and being behind the wheel convinced her of a "need for speed". The Fiesta, though boasting a much smaller engine, could still reach 100 mph easily when conditions warranted.

To prove her theory, Alice passed a semi hauling two trailers in the left lane, abruptly veering directly in front of it and up an exit ramp. She hit the brakes while observing both suspicious vehicles continue under the overpass and skid onto the shoulder.

"Damn!" she muttered aloud. An early supper at the Denny's would give her time to think about options.

She asked for a booth near the windows, amply rewarded for her vigilance. Whipped cream melted into a mug of hot chocolate while she waited for her Grand Slam. The red pick-up circled the lot, reversing into a space in the last row. The Fiat's driver selected a handicap space beside the main doors, entered the building and crossed the lobby to the men's room.

Alice could've given a much better description to the police, seeing him in the light. The same brown hoodie and sweats, his pot belly jutting over the elastic waist band, and fleshy hands bore a discoloration or birth mark. He sported a greyish beard and bulbous nose.

When he emerged from the short corridor, he glanced around the dining room; the booth stood empty. What he believed a pistol muzzle jammed against his spine caught his attention, and the whispered command to retreat into the janitor's closet could not be ignored.

Nimble fingers locked the deadbolt and switched on a lone, dim ceiling fixture. Alice faced this assailant, scowling.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

He lied, "Meeting a friend."

"That's why you've been following me the last 300 miles?"

She didn't wait for his answer, backhanding him across the pock-marked cheek, kneeling him in the groin and shoving him into metal shelving, which emptied its load of paint cans atop his head.

His bulky hoodie a tent over her small frame, she paid the waitress for her uneaten meal and stepped into the twilight. It had been years since she'd driven a manual transmission, but the Fiat would make it possible to elude the pair - albeit temporarily. She would reclaim the Fiesta later.

As she anticipated, the Ram remained, its occupant poised to follow the abandoned Ford.

He would be there a long time, she chuckled, merging with evening traffic.

Alice diverted into an Arby's 80 miles later, her stomach growling. She groped under the passenger's seat, in the center console, and the glove box for spare change, finding instead a 9 mm Glock pistol, and a ripped sheet of copy paper on which was scribbled a familiar address.

Forty years earlier, as she'd discovered in browsing old publications, 50 acres of prime real estate had been bequeathed to the Franciscans by the parents of a young friar. The two-storey farm house had initially been used as Provincial offices - called the Curia - until the cost of extensive repairs led to the construction of a new complex on the opposite end of the property.

The house had never been demolished, supposedly standing empty for over a decade.

Obviously, these hired assassins met there to receive instructions from their vowed contact.

The Fiat reached downtown before sunset; Alice avoided construction traffic on Main Street, pulling into the Archbishop's driveway just as he emerged from the elegant mansion.

The cleric knew her well enough that, when she requested a minute in private, he signaled his chauffeur to keep the Mercedes engine idling.

The front parlor luxuriously appointed, Alice didn't bother to sit. She explained current developments, her companion already aware of the background.

"You're sure of this?" the tall, greying, robed figure challenged.

She passed him the address.

"My God. When you brought me that wild tale of inappropriate behavior and abuse, I couldn't help but believe you. This... Rome will have no choice but to excommunicate them all."

"That's fine with me," snorted the woman.

"It's tragic."

"When the police arrest them, will you stand with me?"

He nodded stiffly.

With copious thanks, she departed. Dialing the cell phone with her left hand, she kept her right on the wheel, southbound. Police cruisers were already converging on the site by the time she turned onto the packed dirt road.

Just in case, Alice slipped the Glock pistol in the waistband of her stone-washed jeans as she alighted from the tiny vehicle. A single bulb burned behind

tattered curtains of the former development office; a sergeant and his partner mounted the porch steps and banged on the warped wooden door.

Before any confrontation could occur, a silver Ford Flex sped through the cordon of city-owned Chevys and the red-haired, stocky Provincial, Fr. William Myers, bolted into the fray. His almost emaciated passenger, sporting a military-style, salt-and-pepper crew cut - the primary source of Alice's mental anguish - dogged his steps.

"What on earth is going on here?" Myers spat.

The sergeant countered, "Who lives here?"

"No one. It's been abandoned for years."

"Without disconnecting the electric service?" prodded Alice.

Myers' drawn features whipped toward her. "What are you doing here?"

"I survived your hit squad."

Tense silence confirmed the priest's involvement. A prolonged moment elapsed before he addressed the closest officer. "Do you have a search warrant?"

"If the property is abandoned, as you claim, then we have due cause to investigate whether the lights indicate intruders."

Defeated, Myers withdrew to where Alice fingered the butt of her weapon. The delay, however, had allowed those inside to attempt escape. Rather than using the kitchen entrance, they climbed to the second floor and slipped out a rear window, traversing the roof and dropping through the garage skylight.

A flashlight beam shown through air vent slats. One silent signal to the response team sent them in that direction, while Myers clamped his arm on Alice's shoulder, preventing her movement.

"Better if you'd died the victim of a random burglary," hissed Myers' companion toward her ear. "What you did was inexcusable."

"Me? Your tactics screwed me out of my life. What was I supposed to do, let you walk all over me without a word? If you thought I would, you were sadly mistaken."

"You lay people, you women, have no right to object to how you're treated..."

"Bullshit." Alice shook from Myers' grasp. "You're so out of touch with the real world, you have no idea how your self-centered antics offend - and hurt - others. You think, as long as you're not caught having sex, or looking at porn, you can get away with the worse kinds of emotional and verbal abuse, and nothing will happen. Well, I made sure you'll be held accountable for your actions."

Myers grabbed for the pistol. "And, you'll be held accountable for destroying 50 years of ministry, and robbing us of valuable donors."

Her hand raked his face, stunning him enough he dropped the gun. She sprinted toward where the police restrained the tau-tattooed assassins and read them their rights.

The sight of the skinnier priest sending a text did not surprise her. Possibly to their lawyer, arranging for their subordinates' bail. These miscreants would be back on the street before morning, and Alice wouldn't be safe until the lot were convicted and imprisoned.

Additional bad publicity spread nation-wide in the days which followed, earning censure from Rome for those in the Province who were not formally excommunicated and laicized.

The Fiat 500 impounded as evidence, Alice accepted protective custody until she gave her statement and testified before a grand jury. She convinced a former co-worker to drive her back to the Denny's along I-40 to retrieve her Fiesta.

Exiting the parking lot, a sense of relief unknotting her stomach, she didn't notice the red Dodge Ram pick-up take up a position behind the car as she headed toward her new home, new job, and hopes for the future.

Twice the hemi-powered truck attempted to run her off the road, but quick reflexes borne of driving a Mustang saved her. Late afternoon semi traffic impeded her progress and, though nearly pinned against a cattle trailer, she darted between a slow tanker and a Winnebago. The Dodge slammed into the fuel carrier; the explosion blocked all four lanes for eight hours.

Alice didn't hang around to explain.

The Ghost Speeder

A cool breeze blew through the Ford Explorer's open window. The sky overhead resembled a dark, twinkling blanket on this quiet summer night.

Hartley County Sheriff's Deputy Harry Welles traditionally parked his cruiser on the packed dirt near the picnic tables along Highway 54, munching foot-long submarine sandwiches and sipping a soda while waiting for cars racing southwest toward the New Mexico state line.

Always a couple easy citations to be issued, and a change from the occasional drug bust or stolen vehicle chase.

A red blur flew past his position.

When the radar gun sounded its alarm, Harry slipped the plastic liter bottle into the cup holder and slammed the transmission into gear. Registering 140 mph, this would be a huge score.

Even before he pulled onto the asphalt, the miscreant had vanished.

As he searched the general vicinity, to ensure the car hadn't attempted to hide in a vacant cattle feed parking lot or along a side road, the deputy felt a cold chill creep up his spine. No tire tracks, no skid marks - nothing.

He returned to his regular patrol, catching four late semi tractor-trailers running a red traffic signal in Dalhart.

His shifts over the next two weeks involved the same routine, and the same results. At precisely midnight, the red blur clocked at 140 mph, but no actual chase and apprehension.

Before punching out that mid-September Saturday morning, Harry mentioned the phenomenon to the dispatcher coming on duty.

She grinned at the tall, square-shouldered officer. "You've lived here all your life, and you've never heard of Connie Martins and Big Red?"

"That sounds like the title of a children's story," he replied.

"Connie Martins. The gal who owned the Dalhart Theater. She drove a red Mustang GT and called it Big Red. She used to be involved in the drag races on the airport runway that got busted up about ten years ago. You would've been a kid then. That venue denied her lead foot, she'd go out on 54 and hit top speed in the middle of the night once a week or so. The last time we got a call about her, she never came back. No one ever found Connie or her car."

"How long ago was this?"

The dispatcher glanced at her desk calendar. "Actually, today is the anniversary of her disappearance."

Harry experienced that same chill and, once home, couldn't sleep. He didn't believe in ghosts, but his repeated sightings of the red blur could not be mistaken for a hallucination.

In his personal vehicle, he drove out to that stretch of Highway 54, rolling slowly along the shoulder as trucks and cars flew past. He was certain, if Connie Martins had veered off the road, the car would have been discovered.

Unless foul play was involved.

In addition to cattle feed lots, a number of grain elevators stood along the thoroughfare, accessed by lengthy, unpaved roads.

One of the structures, in fact, had been abandoned about a decade ago, when the owner died, leaving no will or children to carry on the business.

Harry braked near a padlocked cattle gate and climbed the rusted metal, hiking to the metal silos, flashlight in hand. No one had been on the property for ages, he guessed, given the piles of blown trash wedged in crevices and the broken glass on the office building.

The door to the main elevator had warped inward, for whatever reason, and Harry entered unchallenged. The flashlight beam caused small animals to scuttle away, but the object they hid behind had a familiar shape.

Beneath layers of corn dust, a red Mustang sat, two flat tires giving some indication of what might have happened.

Crossing the floor, Harry wiped the drivers side window with his shirt sleeve. Still buckled on the red leather seat, Connie Martins' skeleton rested on the upholstery.

Harry felt a chill, though the temperature outside topped 90 degrees.

The Hartley County coroner and a tow truck responded to his summons, snapping photos and performing a cursory investigation.

What they discovered dispelled the deputy's initial theories.

The tires had been blown by spikes - more than one was yanked from each of the two front tires. A bullet was lodged in Connie's skull above the left ear, as well. Whoever committed this crime had hid the evidence well.

The district attorney, responsible for four counties in the Texas Panhandle, refused permission to open a case into the murder, given the length of time since its occurrence.

Harry protested vehemently, to no avail. He, at least, wanted the bullet tested by the ballistics lab, in case there might be a match with other, more recent, crimes.

"Whoever did it is either long gone, or dead," grumbled the official.
"There are other cases which require your attention."

That night, Harry reluctantly parked in his usual spot, the submarine sandwich untouched. Midnight beeped on his wristwatch, and the red blur streaked past the Ford Explorer's front bumper.

He'd figured the unsettled soul wouldn't rest in peace, simply because her bones had been consigned to holy ground.

"Sorry, Connie," he sighed. "I tried."

Stumbling

Jogging every day for over 20 years, she'd never as much as pulled a muscle. The asphalt track along the Rio Grande River in Albuquerque eliminated the need to worry about ruts or exposed tree roots, but when the jack rabbit shot past, chased by the yellow labrador, she didn't react quickly enough.

The fall seriously scraped her left knee and twisted her ankle.

"Shit!"

She recovered to a sitting position, assessing the damage. In the cloudy dawn light, she detected oozing blood through torn grey sweats, the swelling already impeding her movement beneath the cloth.

"You okay?" a masculine tenor hailed from the shadows.

"That your dog?"

"No."

Grimacing in pain, she glanced up as the figure neared. A white headband over a shaggy bronze mane, oversized white work gloves, and green sweats confirmed he'd been running the same path. He extended his hand.

"Thanks."

Rising wasn't easy; she couldn't put any weight on the left foot. She repeated her curse.

"You got a car nearby?" the Good Samaritan queried.

"No. I came straight from home."

"C'mon. I'll help you."

Suspicion briefly claimed her thoughts, then dissipated. Had he been on the prowl with... malicious intent, he wouldn't have been drenched in sweat nor reeked like a high school senior's gym locker.

Progress slow, the mile north took longer than her normal five mile course. She fumbled with the lanyard tucked beneath her t-shirt to extract her house key; he finally commandeered the knot of metal rings and plastic fobs, settling her against the wrought iron porch railing.

She hopped across the threshold, sighing in dismay. All her Saturday plans, shot to hell. Flipping on the foyer light, she turned to close the door; the man had stepped inside.

"I'll... be fine, thanks," she noted, her hand on his chest to preclude further entry.

"Nonsense. You need to get out of those clothes, shower, and get to bed. You'll need breakfast, and an ice pack..."

"I'll call one of the neighbors..."

"No one knows how to care for a runner better than another runner."

True, and there wasn't a hint of ulterior motive in his voice, but...

She succumbed to the inevitable. Abruptly, he scooped her into his arms and carried her to the master bedroom, at the rear of the modest adobe bungalow.

Tossing her a purple terrycloth robe from the closet, he left her to strip off ruined garments, sweat pants glued to her flesh with now-dried blood. Her inherent neatness rebelled at the pile on the carpet when he came to guide her to the bathroom, already steamy from the hot shower.

"Can you manage?" he puzzled.

"I think so."

And, for a few minutes, she did. Supporting herself on the stall's tile wall, she applied shampoo to her tangled auburn mop, then conditioner. Soaping her torso proved no problem, but bending to scrub the crusty brown layer off her leg gave rise to a new wave of expletives; she must've wrenched her spine in the fall, she surmised.

"What is it?" he called through the increasing fog.

"I..."

He drew aside the curtain and assessed the situation with an impartial eye. Stunned and tongue-tied, she couldn't object. No man had ever behaved so... matter-of-factly with her. He snatched the wash cloth off the bar beside the soap dish and squatted to finish what she'd started.

Getting soaked, himself.

He straightened, while she rinsed herself. Searching for a towel, he cast a quizzical expression toward her.

"In the hall closet," she directed, twirling the knob into the off position.

He located the linen storage and brought two multi-colored beach towels, using one to rub his damp head.

"Your turn," she instructed. "I can throw your sweats in the washing machine..."

"What will I wear in the meantime?"

"I've got extras which should fit you."

In fact, the two stood almost the same height, and near the same weight. She watched as he peeled off the wet outfit - if he'd seen her naked, why shouldn't she view him likewise?

What a sight! Lean, hard muscles, not just in his legs but also his arms. An athlete's physique, not a body-builder's. She preferred that firm structure, not the exaggerated six-pack and bulging biceps.

Hobbling to the bedroom, she rifled through an oak chest, then realized all her sweats were in the hamper outside the laundry room. The pain excruciating,

she traversed the short hall, crossed the kitchen and practically fell onto the appliances off the pantry.

Chest heaving from exertion by the time she spun the dial to start water pouring over the full basket, her robe hung open when he reappeared, towel tucked around his slender waist, hair dripping.

“It’ll be an hour before your clothes are ready,” she gasped.

His face contracted in concern. “I’m putting you to bed, right now.”

“No, I..”

A muscle spasm caught her off guard, and she lurched forward. He grabbed her shoulders to provide support, and she slumped against him.

“Do you want me to phone your doctor?” he whispered.

“I don’t believe in them.”

“I can take you to the hospital..”

“Not in a million years.”

An unyielding hand raised her chin so their eyes met. “Why are you afraid?”

“Needles. Hate ‘em.”

He laughed, a delightful and soothing sound. She inhaled deeply, studying hazel orbs framed by tiny laugh lines.

The kiss... just happened. Not passionate - somehow, she could tell he had no experience in this area. Yet, a definite emotion was conveyed..

Neither apologized when they separated from the awkward embrace. Without further incident, he restored her to the unmade double mattress, and proceeded to raid the refrigerator for eggs and bacon, finding steel-cut oats in the cupboard above the sink.

Serving her in bed seemed a cozy arrangement; he ate seated near her feet.

“Nice house,” he commented between bites.

“My parents’. They died a ten years ago this month.”

“Together?”

“Hit by a drunk driver near the Big I, on their way home from a Christmas party.”

“Sorry.”

“Life in the big city.”

The remark apparently jolted her visitor back to reality. “What time is it?”

“A little after ten.”

“Geez, I’ve got to be going.” He gathered the empty plates and flatware, carrying them into the kitchen. She tried to follow, getting only as far as the bedroom door.

"I'll stop by tomorrow to check on you," he announced, having retrieved his sweats from the dryer and dressed in the bathroom.

"No need."

"And stay off that ankle as much as possible!" came the warning as he vanished into brilliant daylight.

She didn't need a doctor - or anyone else - to tell her as much. The pain horrendous, she positioned herself on the living room sofa and watched old movies the rest of the day. Ice packs and elevating her left leg on two overstuffed pillows didn't reduce the swelling; she feared a broken ankle.

Strange he didn't knock when he arrived late Sunday morning. Stranger: she'd forgotten to lock the deadbolt. He carried two grocery bags, preparing spaghetti and meatballs, garlic bread and salad for lunch.

"Your larder was a bit empty," he admonished her.

"My wallet is in my jacket. I'll repay you..."

"No need. It's nice to have someone to cook for."

"You live alone, too?"

He nodded.

"Tough not having anyone to talk to sometimes."

"Agreed."

"Is that why you started running?"

"Mostly, I do it to de-stress from my job."

"Me, too."

"You ready to get back to bed?"

"Yeah, I think I need a siesta."

"I'll do the dishes, then, and head out."

"Thanks."

But, it didn't end there. When he laid her on the mattress, her arms remained around his shoulders, and she pulled him down atop her. After they satisfied each other's longings, they fell asleep side by side.

Even after her ankle healed, his daily visits continued, either early in the morning prior to work, or in the evening. His technique in the bedroom improved over time, as well.

That they never went out together didn't bother her. She was glad to have someone beyond her inane coworkers at the accounting firm with whom she could share her deepest thoughts.

Not until one of the firm's senior partners died did she discover the truth about their relationship. The funeral scheduled for 11:00 a chilly January Tuesday morning at St. Ambrose Church in downtown Albuquerque, she - though not religious as a rule - attended for loyalty's sake. The entrance procession

accompanied by two twelve-string guitars and a choir of 15, she watched as cross and candles passed, then the celebrant in white vestments.

Him!

Her jaw dropped.

He didn't notice her, sitting toward the rear of the faux-gothic structure, but that evening when he breezed into the house...

His only response to her inquiry: "Things happen. Love is no sin..."

"But, what about your vow of celibacy?" she countered.

"When my time comes, I'll answer to God for what I've done, not to man."

Not religious as a rule, she had more respect for his ministry than he did. He did admit he'd never done anything similar in his twenty years as a priest...

Nonetheless, it ended there. He left her in tears, his own heart aching.

The next morning, she threw her jogging shoes in the trash, and hit the local craft store for needlework supplies.

The Gift of Genius

The woman sat on the mattress edge, skimpy hospital gown allowing a chill breeze to blow up her spine. She wrung her hands as they rested in her lap, not understanding why she was confined within the stark, white-washed chamber behind a locked metal door.

Nor did she grasp the amount of time she had been interred.

Vague memories assailed her brain, wisps of visions without coherence: sitting at a desk, pen in hand; riding a horse through a lush forest; a sensation of sheer panic.

Her stomach grumbled. Though not hungry, she obviously hadn't eaten in hours.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, sparked by confusion. A niggling twinge tried to break through clouds within her mind. Somehow, she believed she should know what had transpired...

A grating in the lock preceded the door swinging inward, hinges creaking at an irritating high pitch. The woman's head swiveled toward the noise, an imposing, brick-like figure framed by lights from the corridor beyond.

Once the image stepped across the threshold, a second set of arms pulled the door closed, the lock turning ominously.

The man approached tentatively, consulting a clipboard. He towered over her, tall, dark, broad and bearded.

"Do you know your name?" he boomed, the bass register rattling the metal window grating.

She contemplated the question. "No."

"You remember nothing of your past?" he pressed.

"No, other than the notion that something - like a rubber band - snapped."

"Do you know who I am?"

She gazed at his intense hazel eyes, scrutinizing her while his face remained at an unusual three-quarter angle. "I should, shouldn't I?" she murmured. "You are quite... extraordinary."

"Get some rest," he advised, kneeling to shift her into a reclining position. He stood over her another minute or so, a sympathetic smile curling sensuous lips. Then, he scooped up her left hand and kissed it before departing.

Beyond the closed door, she heard voices, but no distinct words. It seemed, every few hours, the man reappeared - it might have been days. She could not keep track of time, her soul an empty cavern.

He would occasionally mention a name, as if it should spark some memory: Lucinda Howell. He spoke of her accomplishments: composer of music,

best selling author, muralist and stunt pilot. None of it meant anything to the woman.

He brought a shoebox filled with trinkets, allowing her to hold them, each in turn. “Very pretty,” came the noncommittal utterance.

He brought her pajamas and a robe to replace the hospital gown. The pink satin fabric was embroidered with her initials. “Soft,” was her only reaction.

Once, while she was gazing past the bars to the flower-dotted lawns outside, he came up behind her, his height placing his head well above hers, and she felt his breath rustling her hair.

“It’s beautiful,” she remarked absently.

“Does it remind you of anything? The park where you would spend afternoons painting, perhaps?”

“No. It’s an absolute void.”

On each occasion, he kissed her hand. Finally, she queried, “Why do you do that?”

The basso profundo faltered. “It was the way we always parted, when you...”

“We were... close?”

“I am your husband, John.”

“That’s nice. You are a kind, gentle man.”

He sank beside her on the bed, the springs sagging beneath his bulk. “But, you don’t remember how we traveled the world together, reveled in each other’s projects...”

She stroked the stubbly cheek. “How I wish I could!”

His lips brushed her palm before fastening on her mouth. She didn’t resist, nor did she respond. Finally, he withdrew.

“Why do you care so much?” she sighed, patting his arm. “I’ve lost myself, and you’re torturing yourself trying to find me.”

“How can you say that?” he hissed, clutching her fingers desperately. “Just because you... you...”

She matched the pressure he exerted. “Tell me what happened.”

“I don’t know, exactly. I came home from a meeting at the university, and you were sitting at the study desk, pen suspended above a legal pad. I couldn’t read what you’d written but, then, I never could. You were totally catatonic, as if your brain had switched itself off. You were here three months before you even blinked an eye.”

“I had to turn it off,” she drawled.

“What?”

“My brain. The torture, the pain...”

“You mean...”

“It felt like my head would explode, so I had to turn it off.”

When he left that day, the attendants ordered an MRI. She accompanied them to the building’s west wing, as if in a daze.

The man returned - her husband - hope vanished from his eyes. A woman in colorful scrubs brought a parcel of clothes, and John helped Lucinda dress. They left together, arm in arm, and he assisted her into a limousine waiting at the front entrance.

Another man, wearing a white lab coat, followed them to the car. “She’ll never regain her genius,” he whispered. “Once she relearns basic functions, she’ll be as ordinary as any other housewife.”

The men shook hands and, a moment later, the limo pulled into traffic. Seated on the leather bench seat, the woman’s tousled brunette head was drawn onto her husband’s chest, where her lids drooped and she slept.

“I love you,” he pledged. “You may have lost everything that made you unique, but I will always love you.”

The Tinkerer

No one recalled exactly when Will Potter came to Hartman.

Older residents of the town did remember how he repaired the four-faced clock in front of the courthouse, which hadn't functioned since before World War II.

Being able to fix just about anything - often with little more than a screwdriver and pliers - established his reputation so, when he opened his shop on the edge of the town square, customers sought out his services.

As the years passed, Potter diversified to a candy store and soda fountain, since youngsters already made a habit of stopping by after school, propping themselves on metal stools to watch him work.

He became a fixture in Hartman, his slight frame topped by a worn black Homburg strolling every morning from his house. Friendly voices hailed him from their cars and he waved a salute in response.

Just as Potter's arrival date grew murky over time, so the disappearance of another Hartman citizen faded. Jeff Longstreet couldn't be missed on the best of days, standing over six feet in height with broad shoulders and a thick, black mane. He'd been a lawyer and a volunteer firefighter, neither occupation keeping him very busy in the small town.

The hand-written sign taped to his office door, reading "Back soon," had shredded as months followed months, but he never returned and no one questioned the abrupt departure.

Initial rumors - from the senior coffee-klatch crowd - pointed to some lurid romance with a woman from across the state line. The situation was not pursued, however, since Longstreet had no relatives to file an official missing person report.

That is, until a red Ferrari Testarossa pulled into a parking space near the abandoned office one sunny April morning.

Ben Whittle, the middle-aged fire chief, using a pump truck to water flowers in huge pots on the street corner, glanced up and smiled. "Hey..." The words died in his throat, when he realized the newcomer wasn't Jeff Longstreet, unless he'd gone prematurely grey at the temples.

"Can you help me?" boomed the voice from the imposing figure. "I'm looking for my brother. He has an office on Main Street."

"Your name Longstreet?"

The square jaw nodded slightly. "Nathan Longstreet."

"How 'bout a cup of coffee?" Whittle suggested, pointing to the diner already teeming with patrons.

The pair occupied a booth near the window, as the official related what details were available about Jeff's disappearance.

"No one searched for him?" barked the elder Longstreet, nearly crushing the ceramic mug.

"He's a grown man. If he chose to leave, it's his own affair."

"Didn't anyone consider foul play? Check his house, look for his car?"

"Sorry, Mr. Longstreet, we've got a limited budget for police and are short-staffed. We just presumed..."

The visitor rose, teeth clenched. "Well, you presumed wrong. From what you've said, I believe my brother was murdered."

At that moment, the bell over the diner's glass door tinkled. Both Longstreet and Whittle glanced at the entrance, where Will Potter's silhouette was back-lit by the sun.

Thus, the two men didn't detect the horrified expression which briefly claimed the repairman's weathered face. Releasing the door knob, he patted his jacket pockets. "Oh, I forgot my wallet," he mumbled and retreated.

"Murder is an awfully strong word," Whittle protested.

Nathan raged, "When my brother's Dodge Challenger is found in a ditch near Boston, having been sold with a bogus title on the internet, I think murder is the perfect word to describe what happened."

"How'd you find out..."

"The Massachusetts State Police contacted me, as next of kin, when they couldn't reach Jeff here."

"Let's walk down to the police station. I'm sure the chief will want to hear your story."

Whittle left the elder Longstreet in the company of Deputy Police Chief Aaron Skye, who turned on a digital recorder and opened a notebook.

Nathan grew more and more annoyed at the lack of interest. The officer jotted few words on the page and didn't notice when the batteries went dead in the recorder.

"Don't you people have any ethics at all?" he bellowed, just as Chief Drew Onstott made an appearance.

"Calm down, there, Mister," Onstott warned. "I don't want to lock you up for disorderly conduct!"

For the third time, Nathan recounted the notification he received from Massachusetts investigators two weeks earlier about the Challenger being wrecked by persons unknown. They had traced the serial number to Jeff, after discovering the plates and VIN number had been illegally altered.

"When was the last time any of you saw him?" Nathan demanded.

“Long time,” Skye muttered, silently seeking confirmation from his superior.

Onstott clarified, “Years.”

“Dammit!” Nathan grunted.

“Best we can do is get a search warrant for his office across the square,” Onstott offered. “Hasn’t been touched since the day he left.”

“Why don’t you do that, and I’ll meet you there in an hour.”

Skye laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Nathan fumed.

“Judge won’t be back from his fishing vacation until Monday.”

Onstott recognized Nathan’s seething anger at this flippant remark. “I’ll see what I can do to expedite the matter.”

Well into mid-afternoon, Jeff Longstreet’s brother was ready to punch his fist through the front window of the law office and perform the search himself. On a hunch, he strode along Main Street to the repair shop, inquiring whether Will Potter happened to be a locksmith, in addition to his other skills.

Will didn’t shift his attention from the washing machine he’d been repairing. “Sure. I can unlock just about anything. Leave the keys in your car?”

“No. There’s an office down the way...”

The wrench clattered on the floor as Will raised his balding head. “Sorry, can’t help you.”

“But, you said...”

“Car doors, yeah. Padlocks, that kind of stuff. Those old Dunstone deadlocks...”

Nathan had him by the shirt collar in a flash. “How do you know it’s a Dunstone lock?”

“I...”

“How do you even know which office I mean?”

Will tried to wriggle free, unsuccessfully, given the larger man’s strength.

“What the hell is going on here?” Disgusted, Nathan tossed the repairman away like so much trash, and Will toppled into a stack of parts. “You people know more than you’re letting on, and I’m going to find out the truth!”

On that note, Longstreet stomped from the building.

He was contemplating a decent-sized rock outside his brother’s office when Onstott and another man shouted as they violated the courthouse laws.

“You got the search warrant?” Nathan queried.

“No, but Randy’s father used to own this building, and the keys were hanging in his garage,” the police chief replied. “There’s no reason you shouldn’t have access, since you’re next of kin.”

A few squirts of WD-40 were required before the tumblers would give way, and the trio stirred up dust motes as they ventured into the dimly-lit waiting room. Flipping the light switch accomplished nothing, the electricity disconnected.

An empty reception desk indicated no one had greeted clients.

“He was very informal,” Onstott stated. “Everyone was welcome, on business or to pass the time of day.”

Brushing aside cobwebs from the door to the inner office, Nathan caught a whiff of mold and... decay. File folders, piled on the antique desk, showed evidence of rodent infestation, with a nest clearly visible within the torn cushion of the faux-leather chair.

Burn marks on the outdated calendar-blotter and in the metal trash can drew Onstott’s attention. “Someone tried to destroy... records, maybe.”

Strands from a heavy rope were tangled in the chair’s wheels, heightening Nathan’s suspicions. With a deep sense of foreboding, he opened what might have been a coat closet.

Recoiling with loathing and a sudden wave of nausea.

Waving Randy back, Onstott flicked his lighter, providing just enough illumination to distinguish a seriously decomposed corpse crumpled on the floor.

“Call the coroner,” he instructed.

Profuse apologies became a litany as Nathan paced the courthouse lobby, anxious for the autopsy to be completed in the structure’s basement morgue. Everyone from the mayor to the mail carrier expressed their regret at not having taken Jeff’s absence more seriously.

The preliminary report, while acknowledging the difficulty of examining a body dead many years, listed the cause of death as strangulation. Rope fibers had been found embedded in the mangled skin of the younger Longstreet’s neck.

“It’s going to be near impossible to trace the murderer,” Onstott confessed as he presented Nathan with the official death certificate.

“As far as I’m concerned, you’re all guilty. An entire town of idiots who didn’t care enough about a well-respected neighbor to check on his welfare when he vanished into thin air.”

The Ferrari Testarossa roared into the evening twilight, Jeff’s body already cremated and consigned to a metal urn stashed behind the driver’s seat.

Will Potter watched the sportscar speed away as he secured his repair shop for the night. Self-consciously, he rubbed the palms of his hands, where scars from nasty rope burns remained visible, even after so many years.

He wouldn’t have killed Jeff Longstreet if the young lawyer hadn’t been so determined to press the rape charges.

Potter hadn't known the girl was only 14, nor a ward of the state who, when she learned she was pregnant, threatened him with blackmail.

Unlike Jeff Longstreet, her body would never be found, and the man who enjoyed tinkering would live out his life quietly, his reputation intact as the man who could fix anything.

He'd fixed things, all right.

Murdered Mitres

Bishops dying in mysterious circumstances. Not good for Church public relations.

The first: Philip Ingram of San Diego, in his early sixties. Initially, police believed him an innocent victim of a drive-by shooting, gunned down on a Friday evening as he completed the last mile of his daily jog through the barrio.

Law enforcement made no connection between that and the next episcopal murder, Auxiliary Bishop Timothy Rudd of Indiana's Fort Wayne-South Bend Diocese. Parishioners discovered this aging cleric slumped in the cathedral confessional on a Sunday morning six weeks later, a knife wedged in his chest.

Bruce Pilarcik, who'd spent 18 years in the Diocese of Venice, Florida, expired when a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary toppled on him as he supervised renovations to a Lourdes grotto. Police investigators deemed the death accidental.

About the time of the fourth incident - the strangulation of Matthew Arnold, San Antonio Archdiocese - local authorities appealed to the FBI. Even those experts were baffled by a lack of evidence and credible witnesses.

Of definite clarity, however: the culprit made a point to study his victim's habits for as long as a month prior to the crime. On another note, calls to private security companies across the country increased, as body guards were hired to accompany bishops and high-ranking church officials on the most mundane errands.

Father Dale Stephens, pastor of St. Bonaventure Mission on the Navajo Reservation in northeast Arizona, thought little about reports seen on cable news networks and recounted in the newspapers, beyond mourning the untimely passings and offering Masses for the departed souls. In the weeks following Easter that year, he found himself immersed in preparations for the Sacrament of Confirmation. Bishop Emmett O'Malley hadn't visited the parish in three years.

Stephens never expected the celebration to turn tragic.

The final blessing and group photos complete that Wednesday evening, the congregation descended to the church basement for a festive meal. Within five minutes of taking his place at the head table, O'Malley toppled off the folding chair, dead.

Navajo Nation police located a sewing needle coated with rattlesnake venom wedged into the chair's cushion. It had pierced the bishop's thigh.

Fr. Stephens answered questions well into Thursday morning, followed by three Benedictine Sisters and other staff members. Despite his motto, "Keep your

name out of the papers,” the local dailies featured the priest’s photo, and the church, as did the evening television news from both Phoenix and Albuquerque.

Friday, national morning programs included edited footage.

Black shirt unfastened at the collar, he cringed, watching the coverage, running nervous fingers through his military-cropped, salt-and-pepper hair. Beside him, Ann Magnuson - diocesan director of communications and frequent volunteer at the mission - grunted in distaste, fists stuffed in the pockets of her stone-washed jeans.

“There are moments when I’m embarrassed to claim I ever worked as a journalist,” she hissed. “These days, it’s all about sensationalizing the facts to increase ratings.”

“It is what it is,” remarked Stephens. “And it will ruin us.”

“No, it won’t. The assassin did his homework, that’s all. Out here, in the middle of nowhere, he could move freely to implement his plans.”

Stephens’ jaw dropped. “What are you saying?”

“Few people pay attention to strangers on the Rez. He got in and got out, unnoticed.”

“He *had* to talk to someone!” Stephens protested. “How else would he know which chair...”

“Think about it, Dale. All the others were bare metal. You found a padded one for the bishop.”

“Because of his prostate cancer...” lamented the pastor. “That means, I’m responsible.”

“No, it doesn’t. How could you suspect what would happen?”

He sank on the nearby recliner, drawn face buried behind his hands.

Ann squatted beside the brown leather, not easy for the aging brunette. “If it’s any comfort, I fully intend to find out who did this. I already think I know why.”

Hazel eyes squinted at her. “You do?”

“Look at the facts. Ingram, Rudd and Pilarcik all pushed for a return to the Latin Mass, with the chanting, incense and all that. Matt Arnold had already eliminated the altar facing the people. They were openly opposed to the Pope’s calls for reform. The men appointed to replace them are far more moderate and pastoral.”

“As an employee of the diocese, you’re supposed to...”

“I did everything possible to present Bishop O’Malley as a benevolent type, but anyone who spent more than ten minutes with him knew he had... flaws. The whole seven-candles-across-the-altar at the cathedral drove away a lot of

people. They didn't like watching the consecration through the equivalent of a picket fence."

"So, how do you intend to solve his murder, if the police can't?"

"With your help."

"I don't have time..."

"It's not about time. It's about proximity."

"Huh?" Stephens pressed.

"When examining the men and places, a link appears that the cops may not have caught. When one bishop is buried, others show up for the Mass. Some can't, though, due to previous engagements. Rudd concelebrated Ingram's, Pilarcik presided at Rudd's, get the picture?"

"You're saying, the next target will be present at Bishop O'Malley's funeral?"

"So will the murderer." Ann straightened, flexing her legs.

"It can't be that simple."

"It's not, but it's a start."

He reached for an empty ceramic mug on the end table. "Then, tell the police."

"They won't listen."

"Call that... what's its name? Crime Stoppers."

Ann guffawed.

Fr. Stephens frowned, not a pleasant expression. "I don't like the idea of deliberately putting myself in harm's way."

"Nothing will happen during the Mass. It'll be a matter of noting which bishops show up, and ensuring their safety once they head home."

"How? They already have security details..."

"Who aren't armed, or properly trained. With a bit of creative intervention..."

"Eh?"

"Who's to say Emmett O'Malley didn't write his fellow bishops about his suspicions two days before he died?"

Stunned, Stephens rose. "What are you saying?"

"A warning on official letterhead..."

"That's forgery!"

"Even if it saves lives and captures a criminal?"

The priest paused, jaw agape.

"Good," Ann grinned. "Besides, I've had his signature in digital form for years. Every mass mailing used it."

"I still don't like it."

“You’ll never be implicated, if...”

“If?”

“If I’m wrong, and more bishops die.”

Stephens groaned, toting his mug to the kitchen, “Go away.”

Ann left him in a decided quandary. They’d known each other for years, since she hired on with the Gallup diocese almost a decade earlier. They’d been through three bishops - one died of ALS, Lou Gehrig’s Disease - the next hit by a drunk driver less than six months after assuming the reins. O’Malley had been appointed just prior to the last Pope’s death, and refused to accept the new Holy Father’s viewpoint on the Church’s need for compassion.

Dale Stephens realized Ann had fought a valiant battle to soften O’Malley’s hard line, to make the strict doctrine more palatable to Native Americans within the diocese, so they wouldn’t abandon the parishes *en masse*.

The Native Americans, for the most part, ignored O’Malley. They didn’t see the world in the same way Anglos did. Marriage in the Church didn’t mean much - some didn’t marry at all, raising their families in “common law” settings. Teenaged girls who became pregnant entertained no shame about their situation.

Being from Michigan, though serving on the Reservation and in various pueblos for over 40 years, Fr. Stephens still couldn’t wrap his head around this disregard for all he held important.

In his heart, he suspected one of the disgruntled parishioners might have murdered O’Malley, and not the man - or woman - who perpetrated the other assassinations.

Pastoral council meetings, after all, could get very testy, given the personalities of some. Long-held resentments - against previous pastors, those allowed to perform ministries denied others, and so forth - created divisions which Stephens had not been able to heal, despite his best efforts.

He thought inviting Bishop O’Malley to administer the Sacrament of Confirmation would be part of that process.

At least, he wasn’t part of the process to arrange the bishop’s funeral. No one could find the pertinent documents in the files at the diocesan offices, so it was left to O’Malley’s two sisters and a nephew. They couldn’t agree on anything.

The Mass finally took place the following Tuesday. O’Malley lay in state Monday at Sacred Heart Cathedral, but few came to view the body. Anglos attended the wake and rosary services, random others.

Five bishops from other states joined a dozen diocesan and religious priests for the final rites. Dale Stephens, garbed in a plain white stole and chasuble, matching his confreres, wore a disappointed mien throughout. Hundreds

of clerics should have been present in the sanctuary, with scores of laity filling the pews.

Ann Magnuson, as part of her communications duties, livestreamed the event on the internet. Checking statistics, she noticed not more than five people viewing at any one time. From a vantage point in the choir loft, while trying to ignore the organist's shrill voice leading the Latin responses, she scanned the scattered congregation for anyone behaving suspiciously.

She recognized plain clothes detectives, and a pair of FBI agents, soothed that their investigation might have mirrored her own theories. Her methods grew from reading *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* cover-to-cover on countless occasions as a youth. Their training should have led them to the suspect long since.

There... just behind a group of Missionaries of Charity on the left. He wore a dark blue suit, with longish black hair; might be a wig, Ann surmised. His very demeanor indicated a poorly hidden discomfort as the hymnals were ignored in favor of pre-Vatican II chant.

Ann felt the same. She'd grown up playing guitar in church, and loved the lively music so many bishops now rejected.

That, of course, provided no evidence of guilt, she knew. Communion lines forming, she paused to jot down the names of the concelebrating bishops. The posthumous letter from Emmett O'Malley would be slipped into that afternoon's outgoing mail.

Work gave her a reason not to linger at the reception after the body had been interred in the cathedral's lower level crypt. Why those from outside New Mexico felt the need to cater New Mexican-style fare puzzled her. New Mexicans ate it all the time; they'd rather have something different.

She observed Dale Stephens at the buffet table, smothering a heap of shredded beef and beans with green chile, and she gagged.

He hadn't been born in these parts.

Neither had she, for that matter, but she had the good sense to avoid local cooking. Her stomach rebelled at the very notion.

On her way back to the Diocesan Pastoral Center, she detoured onto Old Route 66 and grabbed a Big Mac, fries and chocolate shake.

All diocesan staff had been given the day off to attend Bishop O'Malley's funeral; not surprisingly, only two others had shown up, Ann noted. In the quiet building - a former Mormon church - she shed her green broom skirt in favor of sweats before typing a carefully-worded warning on letterhead bearing the prelate's coat of arms, back-dating the missive one day prior to his murder. The printer spit out color copies, and labels for certified mail envelopes.

As she handed them to the mail carrier, who laid a large pile of junk mail, periodicals and condolence cards on the receptionist's desk, Dale Stephens appeared on the threshold.

"I've been thinking," he greeted her.

She chuckled, "I can tell."

His brow wrinkled. "How?"

"You get a certain look when something's bothering you. More pronounced when it keeps you awake nights."

Stephens smirked. "I haven't slept well since... Anyway, can we talk in your office?"

"Sure."

Ann led him along the corridor, into the cubicle where a Mac and two PCs hummed. She grabbed the brass handle, then remembered protocol.

No priest was to meet privately with a woman. A third party had to be present to rattle a closed door.

O'Malley's sole exception: the confessional. And, if he'd had his way, he would've allowed a witness there, too.

Thus had the sex abuse scandal created excessive paranoia.

It didn't matter; they were alone - which might've made O'Malley roll over in his freshly sealed grave, Ann mused.

She waved Stephens to the high-backed throne which formerly occupied a prominent place in Sacred Heart Retreat Center's chapel. He declined, settling on a stool near a pile of photographic equipment.

"Have you... have you..."

She nodded, enjoying his discomfort.

"If anyone asks the Bishop's secretary, or the vicar..."

"Joanie's been on vacation since the first of the month. I always handle the bishop's correspondence when she's gone. And, Fr. Gene doesn't have access to every letter O'Malley wrote..."

"So, you think we're covered?"

"We?" Ann echoed, curious.

Guilt resounded in his baritone. "If you hadn't told me..."

To distract him, she spun on her chair toward the Mac. "Any chance you recognize this guy?"

She clicked on a .jpg file, opening the image of the figure she'd photographed in hopes of enhancing his facial features for possible identification.

"Why?"

"If you've never seen him before, he might be our murderer."

Stephens' eyes widened. "Are you sure?"

“Not in the least. I noticed he was uncomfortable throughout the Mass, especially with the music. Meaning, he doesn’t like the old-style liturgies. Also, he didn’t receive Communion, and left before the dismissal.”

“That’s not unusual,” the priest retorted.

“Unless he got the information he wanted, and wished to make good his escape.”

“In a rented car?”

Ann smiled broadly. “Good point. I’ll have Rick check the cathedral’s security tapes, to see if they got a shot of what he was driving.”

Bending over her shoulder as he was, she detected Stephens’ childlike giddiness. All reluctance to assist her had vanished in light of a solid clue.

“If he’s flying out of Albuquerque, and the trip takes less than three hours...” he hinted.

“Let’s focus on the car. We know who his next targets might be. If we can get a license plate, and then a name...”

“True, true. A name will get us an address...”

“Unless he’s cagey, and has falsified documents.”

His bubble of enthusiasm burst. “You think so?”

“The guy is good. He must have connections or, at least, sympathizers willing to ensure he doesn’t get caught.”

“That... complicates things, doesn’t it?”

“Remember, Dale, I still have a few connections, too.”

His countenance brightened anew, as he backed from the desk. “Keep me posted?”

“I’ll be at the Mission on Friday. If anything happens before that, I’ll email or call.”

Reassured by her promise, Fr. Stephens departed Gallup for the long drive north and west across the Arizona state line.

The FBI preceded Ann to the church Friday morning. They weren’t reviewing the latest crime scene; they had a warrant for the woman’s arrest.

“On what charges?” the pastor demanded.

“That’s confidential,” replied the taller of the pair, both attired in black suits and ties, despite the rising heat. He added, “Unless you’re an accessory to the crime.”

The uncertainty in his tone gave Stephens a sense the man was fishing for evidence while standing on shaky ground.

“An accessory to what crime?” the priest prodded.

“Murder.”

The aging cleric felt the blood drain from his face; Ann noticed it as she rounded the far corner of the stone rectory. She halted in her tracks and retreated behind the wall.

“I’m sure she can prove her whereabouts...” stammered the priest.

“Can she prove she didn’t compose and send letters to five bishops threatening their lives?” speculated the younger, blond agent.

“She wouldn’t threaten...”

“We have a witness who will testify she hired the man who killed the previous victims.”

His partner silenced him, grasping his arm firmly.

Stephens didn’t know how to respond. His long association - friendship - with Ann Magnuson never gave him an inkling of any such underhanded schemes. She could readily be described as strange, or eccentric, given the creative juices which ran in her veins, but to concoct a series of murders?

He’d given her communion on numerous occasions at the church not thirty feet from where he stood.

Ann, for her part, had not lingered in concealment. She had backed across the parking lot, slipped into the Mission’s old Ford Taurus, and slowly steered onto the gravel road.

The agents, nonetheless, heard the tires. “Who’s that?”

He shrugged.

By the time the officials reached their black Chevy Impala, Ann had vanished in a trail of dust.

The men retraced their steps to where Stephens watched from the rectory porch. “What’s the make, model and license number of that car?” barked the senior.

The priest offered, “I... can look in our files.”

“Do it!”

They followed him indoors, hovering at his elbow while he located the key to the locked cabinet, then rifled through the drawers. Naturally, the information they sought came from the bottom, in the last hanging folder. This delay gave Ann the head start Stephens intended.

When the agents slammed the door behind them, the pastor snatched his cell phone off the desk and found Ann’s name in the contact list. He never considered the phone might be monitored...

“What’s going on?” he queried as she activated the speaker so she could drive hands-free along the narrow, winding road.

“Hell if I know.”

“Why do they want to charge you with murder?”

“Search me.”

“What did you write in those letters?”

“Only that the bishops may wish to be vigilant in case they are followed by a suspicious character, because it could mean their lives.”

“Oh, my God.” Stephens sank on his desk chair.

Breathing hard, she ventured, “What?”

“Don’t you see? There’s little difference between a warning and a threat...”

“That’s nonsense. And whatever witness they claim to have, he’s probably being paid to lie, or has been offered a plea bargain for some other crime he committed.”

“Are you saying the FBI...”

“Of course! Being pressured by the Conference of Bishops, or even the government, to stop the killer, they’ll do anything...”

Through the earpiece, Stephens heard skidding tires. “Slow down, for Christ’s sake,” he admonished. “They’re not on your tail.”

“Yet.”

“Where will you go?”

“Remember where we first met?”

St. Francis Cathedral in Santa Fe. “Yes.”

“I’ll be there tomorrow at 1:00, if you want to say good-bye.”

“Good-bye?”

“I’ll not let them lock me in a tiny cell until they figure this out. I told you, I’m going to find the killer myself.”

A final “Oh, shit!” resounded before the connection failed.

He repeated the curse, climbing the stairs in twos to his bedroom, where he grabbed a battered green sports duffel and stuffed in a few clothes, dropping his Roman collar in the dresser’s top drawer.

En route to New Mexico’s capital city, Dale Stephens phoned the cathedral’s rector, requesting a room for the night. He was welcomed gladly, having served on a state-wide religious vocation advisory council with the younger man some years earlier.

He didn’t expect the authorities to take any interest in his movements, never checked his rear view mirror to ensure he wasn’t being shadowed. His second phone call was to the pastor of a neighboring parish on the Reservation, asking him to cover the Sunday Masses that weekend in case he didn’t return by Saturday evening.

The worst part: waiting. Conversation over a home-cooked dinner that evening didn’t deflect Fr. Stephens’ thoughts from bone-chilling scenarios. How

on earth could Ann find the murderer by herself? The prospect of accompanying her niggled at his conscience; he dismissed it repeatedly.

Fully cognizant he would succumb to the temptation as soon as she proposed it.

Which, oddly, she didn't.

She huddled in a pew half-way up the center aisle of the edifice which so resembled the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, Italy. He signaled her into a confessional to the left, not turning on the lights.

"What's going on?" he began.

She countered, "Are they tailing you?"

"Me? No."

A sign of relief. "Good."

"Answer my question, Ann."

"I got a text from one of the communications people in Newark. Archbishop Santos took the letter entirely the wrong way."

"Fantastic."

"I never thought about fingerprints - mine, anyway. They found them on the stationary, and called Joanie in Bermuda..."

"What's your plan?"

"I'd intended to contact the various security agencies who are supplying bodyguards for the five bishops, but that's out, because they'll notify the feds. I'll have to go to each diocese..."

"You can't take the Taurus. They have the plates."

"It's not suitable for long-distance travel, anyway," she acknowledged. He saw her face light up through the thin screen. "What about your Subaru?"

"I just had it serviced last month. It's running... Oh, no."

She'd proposed taking his car, without him.

"Only if I come along." He bit his lip once the words had been spoken.

"Marvelous! We can make better time, if we alternate driving..." The door of the cubicle opened. "Let's go."

"What? Now?"

"Right now. On the way out of town, you can call the rector to have the Taurus pulled into that garage I noticed out back."

Passing the rectory, Ann dropped the Ford's keys in the mailbox.

Sliding behind the silver Forester's wheel, Stephens remarked, "You are unmistakably calculating enough to devise a murder..."

"A detective needs to have the same mental prowess as the criminal he pursues."

The key turned, the engine revved. “That sounds like something out of a Sherlock Holmes story.”

Ann rolled down the window. “It is.”

With the aid of an outdated GPS, the pair managed to cross the country in 36 hours. On the outskirts of Newark, they stopped for coffee at a 24-hour McDonald’s.

“Why here, if Santos was the one who phoned the police?” Stephens inquired.

“He phoned the police because he suspected he was being followed, most likely. Besides, we have to start somewhere. If the assassin studies his next victim for nearly a month, we’ve got time...”

“I don’t. It’s Monday, and I can’t be gone longer than Saturday.”

“Rick Carter can cover your Sunday Masses.”

“I wouldn’t take advantage...”

Ann tossed the styrofoam cup into a trash basket. “Fine. If we don’t find what we’re looking for by Friday, I’ll pay for your flight back.”

By 9:00 that morning, it looked like their search might not take the full week. Seated in the Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart for Mass, longish black hair and blue suit...

Ann directed Stephens into the pew directly behind him.

“Are you crazy?” he whispered.

“What better way to get a look at his face than during the Sign of Peace?” Except, the man ducked out prior to that ritual.

Through a side door, so they never did glimpse his visage.

“Damn!” swore Ann after the final blessing.

“At least, we know he’s here.”

“But, if he suspects we’re on to him, he’ll abandon this target for another.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

Stephens glared at her. “Sherlock Holmes?”

She nodded as they trekked to the car.

“Father, may I have a word?” The masculine voice caused Stephens to glance left, but he noticed Ann’s gesture via his peripheral vision and tossed her the keys. She drove off before her companion grasped the oddness of the situation.

He wasn’t wearing his Roman collar, so how did these strangers in Ralph Lauren polo shirts and Dockers know he was a priest?

Because, as he later learned, his photo - and Ann’s - had been posted all over the internet as persons of interest in the bishops’ murders.

Confined in a tiny police interrogation room for three hours, his head ached from being bombarded with nonsensical questions to which he had no answers. The long-sleeved Boston Marathon t-shirt dripped with perspiration. His backside hurt, from the unyielding metal chair bolted to the floor.

“I told you ten times already,” Stephens breathed, patience exhausted, “we think we know who the murderer is. We were sitting right behind him in the cathedral...”

“Him?” pressed the lead investigator, his rank and affiliation unstated.

“Man, woman... or something else.”

“What else is there?”

The pastor’s brain so taxed, it took a few seconds for him to verbalize the thought. “Transgender, they call it.”

A knock on the metal door interrupted this stream of conversation. A female sergeant poked her head through the gap. “Lieutenant, there’s a nun here to collect Fr. Stephens.”

“A nun?” Not the officials, but Stephens.

“Says they’ve been waiting for him to say Mass at their convent since this morning, and got worried.”

The men opposite sighed. “All right, Father. You’re free to go.”

He rose stiffly.

“But, keep us informed of any travel plans.”

Stephens didn’t reply. He had no intention of letting them track his movements.

In the building’s lobby, he recognized the back of a Poor Clare’s traditional habit reading a wanted poster on the bulletin board. He approached, and she turned: Ann Magnuson.

“How the devil...”

“I had to do something,” she chuckled. “I found this in a costume shop downtown. Figured the cops wouldn’t know if it was genuine or not.”

Together they exited to his Subaru. Stripping off the wimple and veil, Ann drove, Stephens too stressed to navigate the unfamiliar city. Instead, he recounted his ordeal.

“Transgender?” Ann muttered. “That’s a wise observation, and a decided possibility.”

He managed a pleased smile. “You think so?”

“Follow through on the theory. A lot of states are cracking down on sexual orientation rights, and many in the Church are in agreement, even though the Pope has called for compassion. If a person can’t receive the Sacraments because

he believes himself a woman - or vice versa - there might be a reason to take revenge on sources of the supposed oppression.”

“But, I was only speculating,” admitted the priest.

“At least, you speculate intelligently. I’ve always appreciated your... profound insights.”

“Thanks.” The vehicle steered onto the Interstate. “Where to now?”

“Atlanta.”

Through grit teeth, Stephens challenged, “Why?”

“The archbishop there is next on the list.”

“You believe our suspect will have moved on?”

“Sure, if he thinks he’s been fingered here, he won’t risk capture.”

“You still refer to ‘him’?”

“It’s just a pronoun,” Ann shrugged. “Until we’re more definite about his identity, it’ll suffice.”

They traveled in silence much of the 15 hours into Tuesday morning. Stephens awoke on the air mattress, the Forester’s back seats lowered, as they exited Interstate 85. “You haven’t used the GPS once,” he drawled between yawns. “How come you know where you’re going?”

“Working for a national newspaper, I traveled a lot.”

He rolled over, jolting upright when Ann slammed on the brakes at an intersection where a delivery truck had collided with a Volkswagen Jetta.

Slowly creeping through an impromptu detour gave him time to pull grey trousers and a blue-striped shirt over his gym shorts and t-shirt. They arrived at the Chancery offices past noon. Archbishop Westmoreland made his way down the stairs with his bodyguard as they spoke with the receptionist.

“Your Excellency!” Ann hailed, ignoring the barrier preventing unauthorized access.

Squinting through thick spectacles, the prelate recognized her curly brunette mop and changed directions. A half-door opened, and the pair clasped hands.

“So, Annie, you’ve gotten yourself in some trouble, I hear,” quipped the black cassock-clad figure.

Her grin reminded Stephens of a brilliant sunrise. “When am I not?” She made the necessary introductions, adding, “Do you have a moment?”

“For you? Always.”

In a sumptuously appointed parlor off the lobby, the trio chatted, while guards reluctantly waited outside the closed door. Ann explained their mission, and the Archbishop displayed appropriate concern.

“Too bad you didn’t see this person’s face,” he commented.

“It would make things a lot easier.”

Westmoreland lifted his bulk off the gold-upholstered armchair. “I’ve never known you not to successfully complete an investigation - even when it meant heads would roll. I admire that tenacity.”

“Thank you.” Stephens detected the flush in her usually sallow cheeks. She recovered quickly, however. “Be sure not to publish or announce your schedule for the next few weeks, and keep the security detail close, even at night.”

“Yes, mother,” the older man promised.

Both knelt for a blessing before the Archbishop continued to his luncheon engagement. Then, sitting on the parlor floor, they stared at each other.

“That was... different,” confessed Stephens.

“He might be overly conservative, but he’s a saintly man.”

“What next?” Straightening, he offered Ann his hand, pulling her upright.

“Minneapolis.”

“You’re kidding.”

Her brown eyes indicated otherwise.

As happens on many spur-of-the-moment trips, Stephens’ Subaru experienced engine problems just south of Chicago around 3:00 AM Wednesday. Not one to use foul language, the priest made an exception in this instance. “I just had it serviced last month, damn it!” he bellowed, kicking the rear left tire.

“It also has 180,000 miles on it,” soothed Ann, bending under the hood. “I think the oil pan’s cracked.”

“Shit.”

“So, we rent a car and come back for it later.”

“No way!”

“Fine. You stay with it, I’ll continue on alone.”

Stephens snarled, “I... won’t let you do that.”

“Then, we’re at an impasse.”

While Ann located a rag to wipe the oil off her hands, a blue Fiat 500 pulled up behind them. The driver stepped out and approached.

“Having trouble?” he greeted.

The woman confirmed his assumption.

“We’ve already called roadside assistance,” added Stephens.

The stranger, long black hair pulled into a pony tail, announced, “They could take hours to get here.”

“We’re fine.”

Ann tried to signal the pastor with her face, but darkness prevented him from seeing the warning. Instead, she took a risk. "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

"If we'd met, I would remember," replied the lean, suit-clad individual.

"Not that I say that to everyone, but I seem to recall seeing you in church."

Close enough to witness the instantaneous transformation of his features, Ann suddenly feared for her life. She backed toward Stephens, ready to command him to run.

With no weapons at hand, perhaps, the suspected murderer of five bishops retreated to his rented vehicle, and drove off into the night.

Ann collapsed against the Subaru's front quarter panel, shaking.

"What was that all about?" queried Stephens.

"That was the assassin," she gasped.

"Really?"

"He's heading for Minneapolis on the same highway... but, now that he knows we're on to him, he'll..."

"What?"

"Boise, Idaho."

"Oh, God. No."

"Damned if I couldn't see his face clearly," Ann spat. "We're still no better off than we were before."

"Meaning, we can't give the cops a description, and go home?"

"Right."

Seven hours - and a generous monetary incentive - later, the Subaru sped west on I-94. Dale Stephens had sworn Ann Magnuson to stop at a hotel somewhere along the route so they could both get a good night's sleep.

"This pace is wearing me out," he admitted.

"You're the one who needs to be back at the mission by Saturday."

"But, not dead on my feet."

She lay awake at the Best Western in Rapid City, South Dakota, that Thursday night, staring at the ceiling, the priest occupying a room on the floor above. A deep suspicion gnawed at her: this would turn out to be a wild goose chase. The murderer, in all likelihood, would go underground now he realized someone had discovered his strategy. Or, he would change it, and go off on some unspecified tangent, choosing targets by another method.

So bizarre that he would stop on the road in the middle of the night to offer help to stranded motorists, she mused. Yet, the good samaritan-type Christians were often the ones who nurtured hidden resentments against those

who might not allow them to perform ministries in church, or label them as undesirable.

Especially if transgender, or homosexual.

He might believe himself acting on behalf of a just God, eliminating obstacles to a more loving, inclusive world.

Rising with the sun, Ann showered and blew dry her uncombed hair. She'd purchased a Crazy Horse monument shirt in the gift shop, out of clean clothes. Fr. Stephens joined her in the lobby for a free continental breakfast before checking out. He appeared relaxed and rested in a plain white shirt and jeans, not noticing the dark circles beneath her eyes.

Distracted would have been a better description. He barely paid attention to the bowl of corn flakes, bagel with cream cheese, orange juice and coffee on his tray.

"I received a call an hour ago," he declared.

Ann didn't glance up from pouring syrup on piping hot pancakes.

"From?"

"I'm on the short list to replace Bishop O'Malley."

The fork paused half-way to Ann's mouth. "Congratulations!"

"Don't, please." Obviously, Stephens entertained no illusions about this possibility. "There's not enough years left in me to make any type of impact..."

"Shit!" the woman gasped.

Puzzled, Stephens scowled. "What?"

"At the danishes."

The greying head instinctively swiveled...

She grabbed his arm. "Don't!"

"Look, Ann..."

"It's... him."

"Him?"

A hesitation preceded, "If you look in that window, you'll see the reflection..."

Hazel orbs squinted at the glass, viewing a slightly distorted image of longish black hair, white turtleneck and blue windbreaker-style jacket. "Well, I'll be..."

"Wait here."

Dumbfounded, Stephens complied. Ann rose and crossed to the napkin dispenser, deliberately bumping into the murder suspect, causing an insulated coffee cup to slosh on the carpet.

"I'm so sorry!" Ann apologized, getting her first full look at the individual's grimace.

Not male.

Female.

A very boyish female - nothing in the way of curves, and well concealed beneath the slightly-too-large clothes. Nose a bit too large for the high cheekbones and dark eyes, lips thin above a dimpled chin.

An athlete.

Would have to be, Ann determined, to strangle a bishop with her bare hands, or rig a life-size statue to topple on another.

Wild thoughts running through her brain, the woman grabbed a handful of napkins and bent to blot the stained rug.

Recognition mutual, it seemed, the assassin placed her tray on the dish rack and strode quickly away.

“You’re letting him escape?” wondered Stephens, crossing to Ann.

“Now I can describe her, she won’t be free long.” Tossing the used napkins in a trash bin, Ann wiped her moist hands on a fresh stack, then turned toward the elevators.

The priest dogged her steps. “So, what next?”

“We go home.”

The doors parted and they entered the lift. “Well, that’s anticlimactic,” sighed Stephens.

“Would handcuffing her in public have been more satisfying?”

“No, I... Why are you so upset?”

“Because I’ve been in her shoes, that’s all.”

The pastor glared at her. “You’re transgender?”

The mere concept brought a chuckle to Ann’s throat. “No, God. She’s not transgender. She’s terribly, terribly unhappy.”

Though their rooms were on different floors, Stephens accompanied Ann to hers. “You could tell that without exchanging a word?”

“It radiates from the soul.” Swiping a plastic card through the reader, the lock clicked. Crossing the threshold, she blocked Stephens’ path. “I’ll meet you downstairs in fifteen minutes.”

He inserted his polished leather shoe into the opening. “Now, wait a minute. You can’t just leave me hanging with some cryptic statement...”

“As a journalist, I learned to read people instantly. I’ve told you that many times. This gal may well be lesbian, or in some manner of relationship the Church won’t recognize. She wants to be a good Catholic, but can’t. There are a thousands - millions, I might say - like her. Where many just abandon the Church, she turned to murder to remedy the situation.”

A revelation consumed Stephens' brain. "You didn't abandon the Church, and didn't turn to murder."

One edge of Ann's mouth curled wryly. "No. That's because I've been an atheist all along."

Literally staggering backward, Fr. Stephens watched the door slam shut.

He carried his green duffel to the Subaru, in time to see the murderer sliding onto the front seat of a red Dodge Dart. He noted the license plate number, and dialed 911 on his cell phone.

Sheer coincidence the pair had encountered this criminal yet again on their journey? Or, had Ann indeed read her intentions correctly, and they'd caught up to her before she could kill again?

Not stopping to view Mount Rushmore, Stephens steered south, sharing the last 14 hours of the trip back to Arizona with Ann in absolute silence. He couldn't devise an appropriate response to her declaration of atheism; she regularly attended Mass, received Communion from his hand...

All an act, all sacrilege?

Finally, crossing the four corners where Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona converged, he managed, "You truly don't believe in God?"

"Anyone who objectively looks at the world the way I have never could."

"But..."

Ann laid her hand atop his on the arm rest. "Dale. I'm sorry. I never meant to deceive you. I've done my job, and done it well - both at St. Bonaventure's and for the Diocese. But, in my book, it's just an exercise in futility. Nothing changes, and nothing lasts. We could all be dead tomorrow, and Mother Nature would go merrily on without us."

They collapsed from exhaustion upon reaching the church grounds; Ann begged a ride from one of the parishioners into Gallup on Saturday morning. Dale Stephens procrastinated about fetching the Ford Taurus from Santa Fe for the time being.

When he finally switched on the television, the national news resounded with the story of the bishop killer's apprehension in central Wyoming. The reward due "the man who tipped off police, and whose name is being kept confidential," amounted to \$50,000.

Fr. Stephens would make good use of it to help the Native Americans.

Sitting alone nights in the rectory, he missed Ann - who he learned had abruptly resigned her position as Director of Communications and broke her apartment lease - and their unpredictable conversations. Her confession didn't change his view: she was a good person, kind and generous. Smart, too. By rights, he should split the reward with her...

She'd disconnected her cell phone, however, and he couldn't reach her via email, either. She might have regretted her words; believed her career ruined. She may have expected him to betray her to whichever new bishop was appointed, or the other staff.

He never would. Friends didn't do such things.

Life went on, the murderer eventually indicted and boldly pleading guilty. William Quinn took over the Diocese three months later, a true pastor. Other bishops learned from the murders, as well, moving away from being dictators of doctrine to shepherds intermingling with their flocks.

Stephens saw hope for the Church, even from his remote mission. But, whenever he drove his Subaru, he remembered Ann with fondness.

Echo of a Voice

Her grandfather, Charlie MacDuff, founded KSAT radio as a favor to his son, George.

A penchant for acting and the flexibility of George's basso profundo to conjure accents, speak multiple languages, and fill each statement with emotion made him the perfect star of early radio dramatizations.

KSAT's "Saturn Productions" were soon syndicated across the country, being heard on Thursday evenings by millions of listeners.

After Charlie died, George took over the station temporarily, but the times had changed with the availability of television. While he continued to earn considerable sums doing voice-overs and narration, the shine had gone off his favorite project.

He hired disc jockeys to spin platters and solicited sponsors to finance the operation.

George tied the knot at age 50 to a beautiful and charming 26-year-old grade school teacher. She gave birth the following summer to Katrina who, when her father died unexpectedly of a heart attack, took the reins of KSAT at 19 and vowed to make it a success.

She discovered her father's old recordings in the studio vault and spent a small fortune having the reel-to-reel tapes digitally remastered. Blocking out a late night time slot, she created "Insomniac Theater" and began running the old adaptations of classic novels, Shakespeare and original tales.

Public reaction amazed the neophyte business woman. Comments from the radio audience, especially older listeners, praised the resurrection of this "golden age" format and begged for more.

Katrina posted on social media sites - and the KSAT website - an ad seeking voice talent for new Saturn Productions. On the day specified, individuals filled the waiting room and formed a line out the door.

Auditioning from one of George's old scripts - another find on the bottom shelf of a rack holding old vinyl albums - the station owner endured disappointment after disappointment. Either the versatility was missing, or the reading was flawed.

Taking a break for lunch, Katrina overheard one of the applicants chatting in the lobby. She did a double-take, so positive was she it could be her father's resonant voice. She halted in her tracks and glared at the tall, robust figure, topped with shaggy black hair.

"Come with me," she ordered.

With a grin at his companion and a shrug, the young man followed Katrina into her office. She tossed him the script and settled behind Charlie's brass-trimmed oak desk.

"Read," she stated.

"Read what?"

"Start at the beginning, and read - aloud."

"Which part?" he puzzled.

"All of them."

Hesitating, he drawled, "Okay..."

He meandered around the office, the thrill of hearing him hold an entire conversation - man, woman, child, with proper intonation and accents - raising goosebumps on her arms.

As he closed the cover 20 minutes later, she announced, "You're hired."

He protested, "You don't even know my name."

"You can leave your contact info with the receptionist. We start rehearsals and recording next week." She rose, extending her hand.

He clasped it and squeezed gently.

Katrina thus fortified, she had a hamburger and chocolate shake delivered as she ran through the rest of the candidates, selecting four with reasonable vocal skills.

They gathered in an unused sound booth to begin the process of fleshing out an ambitious project: Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The adaptation had been written by George MacDuff toward the end of the syndicated run, but never produced.

Katrina quickly learned a sound-effects technician would be essential, along with background and filler music. Recording was delayed a week while she thrashed out these details.

Every time she heard that voice, however - his name was Andrew Kessler - her determination renewed itself to make a go of the program.

Not until the night before recording did Katrina bother to look at his personnel file. Only 21 years old, he appeared much older, due to his impressive physique, penetrating hazel eyes and register that dropped to the absolute basement when assuming the persona of Edward Hyde.

The station owner also remained unaware of the female troupe members' attraction to Kessler. Written reports - from overnight DJs or security guards - of him being found in the dark vault after rehearsals, necking with one or the other, were kept off Katrina's desk by her secretary.

"We can't upset her now," was that employee's rationale. "This is too important to her."

The Jekyll and Hyde performance was simulcast over the airwaves and on the internet. Word had spread about the premiere, and positive feedback flooded into KSAT from around the globe.

Overwhelmed, Katrina sat at her grandfather's desk that weekend, staring at piles of printed emails and stacks of pink phone message slips.

She'd already condensed another personal favorite - Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* - for the following week. When Kessler knocked on the office door, summoned to pick up the script, Katrina beamed at him.

"Thanks to that... that... marvelous instrument in your throat, we're a hit!" she proclaimed, rising to shake his hand.

He favored her with a half-smile he used to entice the female cast. "I'm glad." Taking her hand, he pulled her into a powerful embrace and kissed her.

Receiving a fist in the breadbasket for his trouble.

"That kind of behavior doesn't fly at my station," she barked.

He chuckled, rubbing his midsection. "You should tell that to your staff."

Katrina blinked, jaw agape. "What? Do you mean..."

"They can't keep their hands off me."

This problem merited serious deliberation, the woman determined without speaking. "Start learning your lines," she directed, passing him the folder. "I'll see you Monday evening."

"Sure thing." Kessler blew her a kiss as he crossed the threshold.

Returning to the desk, Katrina flopped onto the brown buttoned-leather chair. She couldn't have this man - regardless of his talent - playing stud to her employees.

Nor could she pin a "Hands Off!" sign on his back.

Every one of the women had reached the legal age of consent, and she couldn't stop them from pursuing a man who was - undeniably - handsome, intelligent and seductive.

She licked her lips. No one had kissed her like that since the high school prom, when Benny Pratt hoped to get lucky.

Monday morning, nonetheless, a memo was distributed via email to the personnel, reminding them of the standing rule that unprofessional conduct, especially of an intimate nature, was prohibited on the premises.

That didn't stop Andrew Kessler from stepping out into the alley to carouse and caress his latest flame between recording sessions.

Inevitably, the situation spilled over into the studio. During rehearsal for *Les Miserables* that fourth week, Ann noticed how Maggie always tried to stand at the same microphone with Andrew, and let the accusations fly.

At the mixing board behind thick glass, Katrina suspended the proceedings. She signaled her star into the corridor.

“You’ve violated policy,” she remarked.

“Technically, no. Nothing’s happened inside these walls... lately.”

“Don’t think I won’t fire you, if you keep this up.”

He chuckled and flashed that singular grin. When they rejoined the others, the two women were attempting to rip out each other’s hair.

Production ceased. Both Ann and Maggie received written reprimands and a verbal warning from Katrina, with Maggie quitting on the spot. Every female at the station simultaneously resigned that Friday, leaving Katrina glaring at Andrew across the sound effects table.

In the end, only three new programs were completed for the Saturn Productions series.

Katrina later heard, through the media grapevine, Andrew Kessler had been forced to marry a girl he’d gotten pregnant while performing Shylock with a summer Shakespeare-in-the-Park company in Michigan.

Late at night, she would switch on those recordings, nonetheless, and sigh at the voice which reminded her so much of her father, yet had ultimately been wasted because of its owner’s immaturity.

Paradisio

Sailing around the world.

Alone.

Stupid.

The storm engulfed me on the tenth day crossing the Atlantic, disturbing my afternoon nap after I'd lashed the wheel traveling south-southeast. Whether it qualified as a full-blown hurricane, I could not tell - and it didn't matter. Fierce winds shredded my sails and salt water slamming the deck ruined my navigation and communication equipment.

Not that I couldn't use a sextant; I had packed one with just such contingencies in mind. Emerging from the wild seas and driving rain into brilliant daylight, however, rendered the device useless for the moment.

Before me, just on the horizon, I sighted land. Not knowing my location, I decided to swing over and drop anchor, allowing time to rest in relative safety, then consider how repairs could be made.

A lovely island, tropical foliage visible from my position in a cozy bay. No signs of life, so I guessed no cannibals would bother me. I slept eight hours, rising as the sun descended, with orchestral music accompanying the lapping of gentle waves against the hull.

Confused, I jiggled knobs on the console radio. No signal would reach this far off shore from the mainland. When the melody abruptly halted, I perceived the island as its source.

Needing a bath anyway, I dove into the water and swam to the sandy beach. The combination of palm trees and undergrowth appeared to create an impenetrable barrier, until I glimpsed a narrow path leading to the interior.

The only comparison I can make to what happened next originates in the 1930s movie *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy is transported from Kansas - scenes filmed in sepia tone - to Oz via a cyclone. When she opens the door of the house, images in full color await her.

So it was, when I emerged from the dense, jungle-like forest.

A thriving - albeit modest - town stretched ahead, with houses, businesses, and a concert rehearsal in progress beneath a gazebo in the square. I pinched myself, to ensure I wasn't still asleep and dreaming.

Couples strolled along the packed dirt thoroughfare, dressed in clothes from another century: long skirts on the women, starched linen shirts and leggings on the men. Children played with toys having no connection with the modern technology I'd left in favor of my journey.

No mistaking how out of place I looked with my dripping long brown hair, soggy blue tank top, cut-off jeans and bare feet. I recalled episodes of old Star Trek series, where the crew discovered new civilizations and were bound by the Prime Directive not to interfere.

At least, I wasn't wearing a red shirt.

Too late for me to retreat to the boat. A procession of townsfolk marched toward me along the main drag, some carrying violins and woodwinds.

Four of them held a type of flintlock rifle at right-shoulder arms.

Without a word, I was surrounded by the make-shift soldiers and escorted to the heart of the settlement. The crowd spread themselves near the steps of a two-story brick structure while I was led up stone steps and through an arched doorway.

Dimness within confirmed no electricity. The main chamber reminded me of photos I'd seen of British courtrooms, a lone candle illuminating a long bench on a dias against the far wall, two smaller tables and chairs on the parquet floor, and benches arranged around the perimeter on risers so spectators might have a good view of the proceedings.

An imposing figure in a dark frock coat and ruffled-collar shirt stood beneath the rough-hewn ceiling beams. He dismissed the armed squad with a wave of his massive paw and, once the door slammed shut, I shuddered.

"Who are you?"

His voice rang like the pure tone of a deep bell I'd once heard from the steeple of an Italian church. He'd evidently calculated his exact position to take advantage of the acoustics, creating an echo that almost deafened me.

My hands covered my ears while the noise faded, giving me a chance to study him for a moment. Height-wise, he topped six feet. I couldn't help but compare him to my four older brothers, all of whom had been long, tall drinks of water. This man was not. He might've qualified as a defensive back on any professional football team, so broad his shoulders and muscular his legs - as visible within rather tight grey leggings, tucked into brown leather boots. His stony features gave no indication of kindliness, black hair parted on the right, mustache and beard well trimmed along the square jaw.

"My name is Crystal Fontaine."

His left eyebrow twitched slightly. "Et d'où venez-vous?"

Odd he would switch to French, though I'd had enough in high school to understand he sought my point of origin.

"A small town outside of Boston."

"Ah, the Colonies."

I protested that designation, before asking his name and that of the island.

“All in good time,” he replied. “Your craft has been impounded for the duration of your stay.”

“Impounded? By whose authority?”

His lips formed a minuscule smirk by rising a fraction of an inch on the right edge. “Mine. You are trespassing and shall be punished accordingly.”

My jaw dropped; I felt it. Using the simplest phrases I could muster, I related the tale of the storm and the damage my boat had sustained.

His expression softened slightly; I detected a glint of sympathy in his hazel eyes by the candlelight. “Our... forebears came to this place under similar circumstances,” he stated with a degree of hesitance. “You shall be allowed your freedom, for the present.”

With a gait equal to my own - having to match my brothers’ long strides just to keep up - he preceded me to the exit. He spoke to the assembly from the stoop. “We shall make Crystal Fontaine welcome.”

He placed his left hand on my shoulder in some gesture of approval, I suppose, at which the people cheered and applauded.

As I descended the stairs, I was assailed by hands eager to shake mine and shouted names I could never remember.

I spun toward the gentleman, who observed the scene from his perch, as a grubby individual demanded, “Monsieur l’Prosecutor, where will she live?”

The prosecutor? I cringed. Well, he suited the position, to be sure.

“Have you not a spare room in your dwelling?” came the reply.

“Yes, but...”

A pleasant young woman broke from the crush. “We have an extra bedroom, and we would love for her to make use of it.”

“So be it,” proclaimed the prosecutor.

Slipping her arm through mine, I noticed the wedding band, neither gold nor silver. She maneuvered me onto a side street, where a row of identical stone houses were surrounded by well-maintained flower gardens.

A few stragglers followed us, watching from the intersection and, when I glanced back, they feigned distraction.

“What’s your name?” I asked my host as we ducked under the lintel.

“Rebecca Gonzalez.”

“Spanish?”

“My great-great grandfather came from Madrid, on the ship which stranded him here.” She led me into a cozy kitchen and suggested tea.

Politely, I refused, prodding, “Tell me about the people here.”

“Oh, for that, you’d best consult the librarians, the holders of the sacred texts,” Rebecca remarked. “First, I’ll get you some decent clothes.”

By decent, she mean a long skirt and high-necked bodice, similar to the frock she wore. “No, thanks. I’ve got clothes on the boat.”

“Monsieur l’Prosecutor will not allow you to... show so much skin in mixed company.”

“I don’t plan to be in ‘mixed company’ once I mend my sails and figure out how to get on with my trip.”

Rebecca’s consternation wrinkled her brow.

I apologized and offered to sleep on the boat, to prevent her from getting in trouble with the head man. “What’s his name, anyway?”

“Monsieur l’Prosecutor.”

“No, that’s his title. What’s his name?”

“That *is* his name. His great-great grandfather, who came on the French ship stranded by the same storm, was Napoleon’s chief prosecutor.”

Two hundred years!

As we chatted, standing in a narrow corridor outside what would be my bedroom, she detailed how each family had retained its status from those earliest days. Farmers still tilled the rich soil on the south side of the island, raising goats, sheep, pigs and chickens - the American ship’s hold containing that live cargo when what I suspected was a hurricane threw all the craft in its path off their courses: French, Spanish and American. Miners dug metals from beneath the earth, facilitating the creation of plows and other tools, along with simple jewelry. Weavers spun thread from plant materials and raw wool, producing cloth on their looms.

Since the day the survivors, numbering approximately 500, salvaged their possessions and agreed to cooperate in settling the island, they’d been living no differently than their ancestors from the early 19th century.

This knowledge explained a lot, except why the prosecutor lacked a proper name.

Though my every joint ached and the bed visible through the cracked door appealed to me, I asked Rebecca for directions to the library.

That one-room establishment, on the corner of the main road and a gravel lane, contained no material published after 1813. The “sacred texts” were the journals kept by descendants of a Parisien university professor, logging births, deaths and interesting gossip, similar to an old midwestern small town newspaper.

A separate volume, its cover some manner of cured animal skin, the paper and ink unidentifiable - though I’m no expert on such matters - had genealogical pages for each family, cross referenced by occupation.

That made it easy to find the prosecutor, whose father and grandfather shared the name of their predecessors: Andre Beaulieu.

I didn't find this significant until I glanced at the facing sheet. Under the heading "Justice de cour d'assises" the only name resembled "Marius de Fontaine."

"Shit!"

My exclamation rated a furious "Shhhh!" from two sisters at a tiny desk near the entrance.

Marius de Fontaine was renowned in my own family for vanishing in 1815 on his journey to assume the post of French ambassador in Washington DC. He left his wife and three sons in London, to await word from him.

He must've remained faithful to his marriage vows, for no offspring was listed.

As a justice of the French Court of Assizes, he would've been the highest ranking official among the island's inhabitants. After his death, that fell to...

The book cover dropped unceremoniously, meriting another warning from the librarians as I departed.

If tradition on this island - dubbed "Paradisio" - stood, Andre Beaulieu, Monsieur l'Prosecutor, had just lost his prominent place in local society.

My search must've been relayed to him by parties unknown for, when I shaded my eyes from the harsh afternoon sunlight, his imposing figure supplied shade equivalent to a sturdy oak tree.

"There is much not included in those books," he boomed. "Pray, join me for dinner."

My growling stomach confirmed the absence of food for well over 24 hours. I agreed.

With unexpected gentleness, he scooped up my hand and laced it through the crook in his arm. We might've been a courting couple, in the eyes of those who passed, except for my ratty attire.

"Rebecca should have loaned you a dress..." he grumbled.

"She did. I refused."

"You cannot..."

My effort to educate him on the practices of the modern American populace fell far short, I fear. Once within the walls of his estate - a palace in comparison to the homes of those he deemed "commoners" - he passed me to a giggly female servant, who practically dragged me into a disused bedroom, throwing wide a wardrobe where hung an assortment of vintage gowns.

"Who belongs to these?" slipped out before I could bite my tongue.

"Monsieur l'Prosecutor's deceased mother. Very petite and prim."

Petite, indeed. The best dress left much of my calves and ankles exposed. The maid promised to summon a seamstress.

“Don’t bother,” I corrected. “No one will see my legs under the dinner table.”

The most difficult part of the evening involved stopping myself from laughing out loud at the ridiculous pretentiousness. I’d seen old movies with actors in similar costumes, dining at a table capable of holding twelve or fifteen guests, seated at opposite ends with elaborate silver candelabra between them so they could neither see nor hear each other.

Not that I couldn’t hear the prosecutor, especially with his set of pipes.

“Your true purpose in coming to Paradisio was to find other descendants of Marius de Fontaine?”

“His descendants settled near Boston nearly two centuries ago, after they presumed he died at sea.”

“So, you do not intend to petition for his rights...”

“I didn’t say *that*.”

He knew, and he knew I knew of the potential to disrupt the *status quo*.

“If I contract the workers to repair your ship, will you leave us in peace and tell no outsiders of our existence?”

Distinguishing the hint of a plea commingled with that harsh baritone made my heart race. This man, for all his strength and power, was afraid of a scrawny 27-year-old wanna-be sailor.

Roast chicken, diced and spiced potatoes and a fresh green salad gave way to a delightful dessert combining native fruits. Linen napkins resting beside the plates, I requested he give me a tour of the house.

“In the hope you will someday claim it as your own?” he challenged.

“Geez, Andre, get a grip on your paranoia, won’t you?”

The quizzical expression compressed his whole face.

I rephrased the statement. “I have no ambitions in that direction.” French doors opened onto a scented garden. “I have no ambitions, period.”

“As befits a woman.”

“Not where I’m from.” As we strolled along stone-paved paths, I updated him on the state of the real world.

“Which is why all visitors - casual or purposeful - are banned,” he responded to my narrative.

“How many have there been since your people landed?”

“No more than a handful. The island is uncharted and off the regular sea lanes.”

“So, you are free to exercise your authority without restrictions.”

“I am bound by the law...” he growled.

I snorted. “The laws created by your family for their own benefit.”

He objected vehemently to my assertion. Entwining his fingers through mine, he tugged me through another set of doors into his private library, where thick French tomes filled a low case.

“He who possesses the law books makes the law?” I spat. “Why aren’t these in the main library for all to share?”

“They... wouldn’t grasp the concepts...”

“Bullshit!”

My face hadn’t been slapped for swearing since I was a child. My left cheek stung; as I made to retaliate, he caught my hand and wrenched it, raising a shriek of agony in my throat.

“It matters not how the moral standards may have deteriorated. Women do not use such foul language in my presence,” the last of the Beaulieu clan scolded.

I kicked his shin, and he released me. With a grim farewell, I shuffled to the door, intercepted by those damned, armed guards.

“You are my guest for the night, Miss Fontaine,” the prosecutor informed me. “Once the matching ceremony is over tomorrow morning, you will be free to go.”

“Matching ceremony?” I repeated.

In some ways, what he related made sense. A special event every June first matched boys and girls in their late teens by a selective process, to prevent any inbreeding between couples who might be too closely related by blood. Of course, he was in charge of the ritual, ensuring no one married out of their class, thus quashing any hopes of succeeding his rule.

Thing is, Beaulieu didn’t realize the island calendar was off by six days and two years.

Locked in his sister’s room on the second level - comfortable enough, if I’d been in the mood to relax - I listened to wildlife beyond the windows. He must’ve assumed women don’t escape down trellises, either, but that’s exactly what I did.

My own clothes probably burned or otherwise trashed, I tore the skirt fabric to shorten the length and eliminate the fullness. Anyone who saw me jogging through the shadows might’ve believed me an errant ghost.

Rather than swim to my boat, I chanced upon a small skiff concealed near the beach. I’d suspected such a ploy, with Beaulieu mentioning having a crew repair the storm damage. They couldn’t swim out with heavy tool belts strapped around their waists...

Climbing on board using a rope ladder dangling from the prow, the first thing I did was change into a t-shirt and jeans. For a tropical climate, the air was surprisingly chilly.

While below, I stashed books I'd brought with me to read in a duffel bag, along with my toothbrush and comb. The people of Paradisio could learn from the likes of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Oliver Twist*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers* - and the sequels - Arthur Conan Doyle's collection of Sherlock Holmes mysteries, and assorted Edgar Allan Poe.

A Colt revolver - brought for protection - and a few other items fit in my pockets.

If my host suspected my absence during the night, he never mentioned it. Come daylight, I accompanied him in my own clothes to the town square, where parents eagerly awaited the announcement of pairings.

The island's population may have numbered 300, if I guessed correctly. Two centuries had caused the original number to dwindle and, not being a biologist, I could only speculate at the reasons. Most of the youngsters didn't strike me as bright, or even literate. I wondered if Beaulieu's tactics were to keep them ignorant and submissive.

A total of 16 couples were matched, with the excitement on their faces at the forthcoming nuptials - a fortnight hence - unmistakable. Then, the prosecutor raised his arms for silence.

"The last match is, perhaps, the most humbling for your obedient servant." He bowed as the crowd cheered. "I, myself, will take to wife Crystal Fontaine, the great-great granddaughter of our beloved Marius de Fontaine."

Yes, I'm leaving out a few of the "greats" - calculating about eight generations from Paradisio's original inhabitants.

So, that was how he intended to stop me from usurping his power, I mused. He would expect a compliant wife, available to fulfill his pleasures - all his pleasures - at the drop of a hat.

Boy, did he have another trick coming.

A hush fell over the group huddled near the courthouse's bottom step when Beaulieu broke out a long, narrow jeweler's box. He opened it to reveal a stunning diamond pendant on a knotted gold chain.

Stunning, that is, if I leaned in that direction. I had four older brothers, after all, so a bruise was more a mark of honor than some sparkling bauble.

A collective gasp rose as he draped the heirloom around my throat. "This has been passed down from bride to bride for four hundred years," Beaulieu whispered, whiskers tickling my right ear. "Do not dishonor it."

My goal became doing just that over the next 14 days.

Not that much energy was required to accomplish the feat. No more did some of the residents discover the books I had secretly added to the library's collection, than minds began to open and traditions crumble.

I remained Beaulieu's guest/prisoner, though he suppressed his authoritative composure in - what I supposed - an attempt to alter my perspective.

"I value honesty above all," I told him the night he brought a cup of steaming tea to my room. "Diplomacy is no different than calculated lies."

"You could be a beautiful woman, if you... let the maids assist you," he opined, staring me up and down in my purple gym shorts and black sports bra.

"I am what I am, as Popeye used to say."

That confused him, and he angled his face a bit sideways, glaring with those menacing hazel orbs.

"You want to consolidate your position in the community, at my expense, but you haven't a clue you've already lost your grip," I quipped. "I've heard rumblings in the town square that some of your reputed loyal subjects want off this rock."

He debated whether I was bluffing and reached no conclusion.

"Yes, you and I could mutter the vows and jump in bed. I could give you a son and heir, but what would he inherit? With me as his mother, he would be discontented from the start. I know things of which you haven't the foggiest notion, and he would ache for those experiences. He would ache to leave Paradisio for the real world."

"Not if his mother isn't... part of his life."

So, that was it. He'd use me as a brood mare then, after giving birth, I would mysteriously die, leaving him to raise the child alone, secure with his power base.

Or, so he believed.

"It's too late, Andre. Contrary to the Prime Directive, I've already infected your people with an illness that brings not death, but life."

The Star Trek reference eluded him, but it best summarized what I'd achieved. There would be no turning back for the citizens of Paradisio. To the last infant, they would soon accept this wasn't paradise.

"I should have killed you when first you entered the court," he lamented. "I could have justified it, as my forebears did the others."

I'd been gazing out the window at the full moon. Turning to face him, I shook my head. "You wish me to marry into a family of murderers? Where is the honor in that?"

He swore in French, and my high school classes only allowed me to catch a phrase or two about the divine right of rulers.

“You don’t want to go there, Andre. If that’s how you judge, then I’ll mount the courthouse steps tomorrow morning and make my claim - and you know the people will side with me! You will lose everything.”

He lunged; I dodged and his momentum propelled him onto the balcony and over the railing. I raced after him, to see him dangling from a vine 30 feet above the ground, right hand flailing desperately.

Pride precluded him asking my assistance. I recognized the fingers of his left hand loosening and could not permit myself to descend to his level.

“Take my hand,” I instructed, bracing myself against the railings’ base and stretching to him.

“You’re not strong enough...”

“Try me.” Not convenient to tell him I could bench press 200 pounds before I was 15.

Once secure in his hold, I paused before hoisting him upward. “We marry, and begin the process of creating a democracy, where every citizen has an equal voice,” I dictated.

He slipped an inch. “Agreed!”

“A select crew, with the two of us along, will travel to the mainland and gradually introduce modern... innovations.”

“Yes, yes! Whatever you say!”

“You’ll put it in writing and post the proclamation on the courthouse door within the hour.”

“Please!”

Naturally, once he stood on a solid surface, he reneged on the deal. I flicked a switch on the digital recorder I’d activated before helping him. His head swiveled, trying to ascertain from whence his voice originated.

“I will play this for the townsfolk in the morning, if you don’t abide by our accord,” I threatened. “This is your chance to truly help the people, not oppress them.”

Crestfallen, I could see straight white teeth clenched between his facial hair. “You are a conniving...”

“Blame my brothers,” I chuckled. “Creative blackmail was a necessity to get one up on them when we were kids.”

With a sigh, he settled in a faded wing-back armchair. “You *will* marry me?”

I nodded.

“In a proper wedding dress?”

A shrug sufficed for an answer.

He jerked me onto his lap and kissed me. Not bad, really.

Hell, I never really wanted to sail around the world, anyway.
Far better use of my time, reshaping an entire civilization.

The Cop and the Cowl

“How now, brown cowl.”

Smirking to suppress her chuckle, Rose Altum watched the procession of jubilarians reverence the altar at Santa Fe’s Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi. Her position on the aisle allowed her to see the priests’ aging faces - one in particular.

When he’d first donned the brown Franciscan habit as a novice more than 50 years earlier, she’d called him, “Mike-cowl,” a variation of his name, Michael. Funny to an eight-year-old attempting to deal with the fact her favorite person on the planet would be living far away. The greeting became a source of comfort for her - and him, she suspected - though they seldom discussed emotions.

And, those days had been emotional indeed. Rose’s father had died soon after her birth, a police sergeant shot while pursuing a bank robber. Her mother, traumatized by the loss, had descended into serious depression which, left untreated, resulted in her suicide.

The curly-haired toddler became a ward of the court, living in a series of dysfunctional foster homes until the Hillebrand family, distant cousins, petitioned for custody.

Eldest son Michael, 15 years her senior, became Rose’s first crush.

So long ago.

Had she ever really recovered from the heartbreak of his announcement that he was entering the Order of Friars Minor, intent on becoming a priest? She’d never married, refusing more than a few offers along the way.

Seated in the uncomfortable pew that sweltering afternoon, she wondered.

As Michael celebrated a half-century since professing vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, she was contemplating retirement from the Albuquerque Police Department.

They’d finally be able to take that trip to Europe they’d jokingly planned over the decades, neither having the money or time to previously enjoy such travel.

But first, first...

Rose had devoted her adult life to living up to her father’s imagined expectations. Rumor had it he’d wanted a son to follow in his footsteps. She’d done everything in her power, rising through the ranks, to become Chief of Detectives. The cases she’d solved had stumped many of the men, but she always felt she had an inside track on how the male mind functioned.

Thanks to Michael, and his three brothers.

One of whom - Steve - she'd been instrumental in sending to prison for securities fraud.

The day of his sentencing in court had almost torn the family apart.

Only Michael had stood by her when the rest shunned her as a traitor.

Not her fault they'd played football together, kickball, rode home-made go-carts and gone water skiing, and she heard every comment and retained it. Steve's inherent greed - a reaction to his elder brother's rejection of all things material, perhaps? - provided Rose sufficient insight to connect the dots when the investment firm he managed reported missing funds.

She'd received a citation from the mayor for that investigation, which she'd promptly burned.

All these memories flooding her brain, she didn't hear Archbishop Santos intone the opening prayer.

The case looming before her dwarfed Steve's crimes - one last, unfinished mystery she needed to solve before turning in her badge.

Forcing niggling details from her consciousness, she focused on the Mass, albeit briefly.

In the pew opposite, Andy Hillebrand, his wife, two sons, spouses, and five teenaged grandchildren exchanged hushed comments throughout the Archbishop's homily. They still lived in New Mexico, while Rick, the youngest, worked in Ireland, at last word.

Michael made a point to find her during the chaotic Sign of Peace, wrapping his arms around her - an awkward process with the alb and chasuble impeding his movement. He whispered in her ear, "Peace, kiddo!"

Communion lines filed interminably past; Rose puzzled if the crowd attended for the celebration, or the food to follow.

For which she could not stay. An overriding sense of duty compelled her to dedicate no less than 60 hours a week to her job, and this particular series of crimes demanded even more of her. She'd been lucky to get back to her cramped studio apartment for a few hours' sleep any given night over the past two months.

Taking off an entire Friday afternoon raised a sense of guilt in her soul no mere session in the confessional could assuage.

She did hang around long enough after the final blessing to watch former parishioners and fellow Franciscans gather for photos on the sanctuary steps. Finally, Michael signaled her forward, passing his iPhone to Andy.

"One with the kid," he instructed.

For a minute, she thought he might wrap her in a head lock, as he had in many photos from their youth. Being the same height now, and with his touch of arthritis, such athletic maneuvers might prove painful.

His hand on her shoulder, the flash popped, and together they viewed the results. Rose never liked how she appeared on film, especially when interviewed by the media after apprehending a criminal.

“You coming to the dinner?” inquired Michael, wiping perspiration from his brow with a wrinkled handkerchief.

She replied, “Got to get back to work.”

“Always the same answer. You know, you’ve burned out before...”

“And you kept me from being a candidate for a rubber room.”

“Not an easy task.”

“No worse than teaching me how to ride a bike.”

Kissing her cheek, he let himself be led off by his younger brother and other well-wishers.

Strolling out into scorching sunlight, Rose buried her sun-bleached mop under a UNM Lobos baseball cap. Where most of the women had worn dresses or skirts to the ceremony, she’d kept to her traditional black slacks and collared white shirt.

Always the cop.

She slid behind the wheel of a red Chevy Impala, fumbling for her keys. The last two hours slipped from her mind; the notion of a rapist on the loose griped her.

It had taken far too much time just to track down the unprocessed rape kits turned in by area hospitals, then discovering the culprit’s DNA was not on file...

None of his twelve surviving victims had seen his face. He crept up on them from behind, with a ski mask hiding his features. The one who had managed to rip off the mask had been so badly beaten, she was declared brain-dead and taken off life support by her family.

Adding a murder charge to the long list of felonies.

Descriptions varied from woman to woman. Some saw him as tall and thin. Others, medium height and overweight. Rose attributed the discrepancies to their emotional trauma.

The incidents had happened across New Mexico, not just in Albuquerque. For a short time, Rose suspected the man might drive a semi for a living, but a thorough search of major freight carriers’ computerized travel logs showed no correlation to the places and times of the attacks.

The guy was careful - of that, she had no doubt. He made sure no witnesses saw him before, or after, he committed these heinous acts. She guessed he might lay in wait for hours before selecting his victim or, at least, spend days watching a potential victim’s daily routine.

Cruising down I-25 toward Albuquerque, she admitted her own confusion. Nothing about the case made any real sense, even after all this time. He never spoke, so the women could not describe his voice - whether he had an accent, or the like. Wearing gloves, he left no fingerprints, and they couldn't tell if he had callouses, or smooth skin.

Rose would not allow this case to grow cold, and figured it wouldn't, at any rate. This man would continue to seek out random women until he was caught.

Twenty years earlier, she might've risked becoming a victim herself, but being unable to guess where he would strike next made considering such a course impossible. He preferred those in their late 20s and early 30s - that seemed to be the only commonality shared by the victims.

She collapsed on her desk chair an hour later, hoping Michael's prayers for her "special intention" would bring a break in the case.

Swiveling toward the bulletin board on which a state map boasted colored pins of the crime scenes, the detective retraced them in order: Gallup, Tatum, Ruidoso, Farmington, Deming, Las Vegas, Roswell...

No rhyme or reason to any of it.

The ringing phone distracted her. Beyond her office window, the sun descended in the west. She'd been lost in thought too long.

"Hello?" she yawned into the handset.

"Chief Altum? This is Lieutenant Thompson. We've got another one."

"Where?"

"We're at Lovelace on Montgomery."

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

Siren screaming, Rose made it to the hospital in seven.

She snickered as she entered the emergency room lobby. Michael had warned her many times about her lead foot.

The latest victim lay on a gurney in a private triage cubicle, clearly in shock. A nurse stood with the responding officer, Corporal Norrell.

"Where did the attack take place?" queried Rose.

A feeble soprano muttered, "Coronado Center."

"The mall?"

"In the parking lot," clarified the nurse, consulting a computer record.

"During business hours?" Could the man be getting bolder - or desperate? Or, did he want to be captured?

"To be more specific, the loading dock behind the old Sears," the corporal interjected. "Plenty of cover."

Squinting at the nurse's name tag, Rose declared, "Bonnie, you stay. Everyone else, out."

Settling on a stool beside the gurney, the older woman assumed her most sympathetic demeanor. "Now, tell me everything that happened."

Fear widened the victim's brown eyes.

"Take your time. There's no hurry. I just need to know everything you heard and saw."

The process might have been compared to ancient methods of torture, in some ways. Statements wrenched from the trembling female's soul evoked tears, rage and panic. Toward the end, she curled into a fetal position, sobbing.

Such interviews taxed Rose's soul, also. She felt totally drained upon leaving the chamber, but one particular fact gave her hope.

"Where's the rosary?" she asked Lieutenant Thompson, who'd been waiting near the exit.

He presented an evidence bag containing a green cord with knotted "beads" for the various prayers.

"Shit," muttered Rose. Very little chance of getting fingerprints.

But, it did mean the rapist had Catholic leanings.

And that he might go to confession on a regular basis.

"You can't be serious, Rosie," chided Fr. Michael Hillebrand when they discussed the matter late that evening via Skype. "No priest would violate the seal of confession, even to help end a crime spree."

"That's called contempt of court," she countered.

"It's happened before. You'll have to get your evidence elsewhere."

"But, Mikey..."

"No, Rosie. Your only chance..."

She shuddered, an idea forming. "What if... what if..."

"Well?" the Franciscan pressed.

"If the guy goes to confession, but doesn't really intend to make amends for his sins... that means the priest wouldn't absolve him, right?"

Michael considered. "True, but then why confess at all?"

"Because... because he doesn't want to be doing these things. He wants to be forgiven. But, whatever compulsion drives him... And the priest would have to know the guy is a repeat offender, if you will, hearing the same sins over and over..."

"Thing is: he might go to a different priest every time."

"No, this guy probably presents as a devout parishioner, maybe even a lector or eucharistic minister. Why else would he carry a rosary, while doing everything possible to hide his identity?"

“You might be right.”

Rose guffawed. “When am I ever wrong?”

Oh, that look! All too well she remembered being on the receiving end of an expression intended to remind her of the need for humility. Whether his straw-textured hair was longish and brown, or close-cropped grey - as now - the thick, arched left eyebrow above penetrating hazel eyes, straight nose and firm cheekbones, with a certain sidewise grin...

“Okay, okay,” she conceded. “I’ll let the confessional idea go, for the time being.”

“Permanently, Rosie. It’s a dead end.”

“G’night, Mikey.”

Clicking the mouse on her laptop, Rose sent the machine into sleep mode. It irked her when Michael’s wisdom trumped her instincts. Of all the Catholic churches in New Mexico, she’d never have been able to locate the priest to whom this deviant confided his misdeeds, anyway...

Her own slumber came in fits and starts that night, every possible lead discounted. If the rosary had a tag to trace its origin, but a bunch of knots in a cord were common these days, made by Poor Clares in Roswell and youth groups to raise funds. They could be bought at any religious goods shop. A dead end, for sure.

Yet, her subconscious persisted in evaluating the myriad angles...

She crawled off the futon at 4:33 AM, stumbling to the shower. Somewhat refreshed by the water’s warm stream, she chose a Moody Blues t-shirt and jeans from her closet. Saturdays, no one expected professional attire.

No one expected her at the office, either, but she invariably showed up. Once again, she sat on the battered chair and gazed at the wall map.

There had to be a pattern to this madness. The locations where the assaults took place had to have some significance...

To a frustrated Catholic, it might mean...

She spun toward the desk and typed a search on the Google home page.

“Oh, my God,” she repeated with each succession of results.

A list filled two pages of a scratch pad, the implications of which chilled her blood.

Each assault had taken place within two miles of a Catholic church.

Cross-referencing the times priests offered to hear confessions with the crimes, the culprit could’ve cleansed his soul within four hours.

One such might’ve been to Michael Hillebrand himself, who’d been pastor of St. Francis Church when an attack took place on the Gallup Flea Market grounds.

He knew. He had to know. And he wasn't about to admit it.

As much as any priest might try to forget the sins revealed to them either face-to-face in the Reconciliation Room, or behind a screen in the more traditional confessional, hearing that a man had raped a woman less than a day before would remain a horrifying memory.

That priest would, by rights, make turning himself into the authorities part of the penance upon which absolution would be based.

If the penitent did not fulfill the penance, the sins were not forgiven.

Didn't that mean the seal of confession did not apply? she mused.

Regardless, this information gave her a potential resource...

"Cyndi!"

Summoning the department secretary, she instructed the rookie officer to phone every Catholic church in the state, warning them of the potential for a rape in their vicinity. Rose wanted an announcement - which she wrote herself - published in their Sunday bulletins for the next three weeks.

If the rapist saw it, and realized his methodology had been discovered, he might stop...

Rose badly wanted to direct the priests against holding confessions over the course of the next month. That sacrament had seen a decline in popularity - except during Advent and Lent - since her childhood, so it shouldn't matter too much.

She decided not to push matters that far.

The call came in Sunday afternoon.

"How now, brown cowl?"

"Are you nuts?" Michael's tone betrayed strain and exhaustion.

"Why do you ask?"

"I've gotten 20 voice mails from irate Franciscans and two bishops. They all know you're my sister..."

"Good, then they might be willing to help."

"There's nothing they can do once someone enters the confessional..."

"Bullshit!"

"Rosie, please. There's got to be another way."

"I've been working this case for eight months, Mikey. This is as close as I've been..."

"I'll volunteer two days a week to counseling the victims, if you just..."

"That's nice of you, but I'm not going to quit."

"There's talk of excommunication."

"So?"

"Yours, not the rapist."

“So?” she affirmed.

She heard him disconnect and realized she’d hurt him deeply by mocking his beliefs. Her dedication to protecting the public superceded any religious doctrine, however.

The weeks which followed might have allowed for some healing of this rift between friends, except for the pressure placed upon Rose by the police commissioner, and equal discomfort displayed by clerical authorities. The woman felt suddenly very alone, her one source of solace and dialogue ignoring her.

When her cell phone vibrated the end table that September Tuesday morning, Rose didn’t want to open her eyes. The report of a sexual assault in Grants shot her off the futon. Glancing at the clock, she calculated two hours until Mass at St. Teresa of Avila parish in the town, and the opportunity for confession.

She didn’t notice her blouse buttoned crooked, or her shoes mismatched when she flew out of the apartment and jumped into the Impala. Racing west along Interstate 40, she passed lines of semis hauling their goods toward Arizona and California. She swore at some of the drivers, especially when they attempted to pass slower vehicles on uphill slopes. Hitting the brakes not in her nature, she laid on the horn and flashed her lights.

The vehicle screeched to a halt in the squarish, adobe church parking lot as the entrance hymn ended on a sour *a capella* note. Slipping through the double doors, Rose scanned the handful of women scattered in the pews. Only two men.

She would wait.

He might’ve been a business executive stopping to pray before an important meeting at work. Reddish hair, neatly parted on the left and combed across his forehead, ruddy features and a muscular build beneath the wool suit, no one would suspect him of ruining the lives of numerous women.

No signs of guilt affected his disposition. Once the Mass concluded, Rose watched him kneel near the Reconciliation Room. Once the pastor had removed his vestments in the sacristy, he quietly approached the converted closet and switched on the light signaling his availability.

The building had emptied, except for the detective and her prey. She didn’t have to predict he wouldn’t take advantage of the face-to-face option. He stepped into the cramped, dark box, above which a red bulb flickered - a short in the wiring, no doubt, she mused.

She crept from her place, and blatantly placed her ear against the wood panel, hearing the horrifying details related by the man. When the priest prodded, “Was this your first time?” the response was a truthful, “No.”

“You need help,” remarked the cleric. “You must seek psychological treatment, and report to the local authorities.”

No reply.

“Pray an act of contrition.”

Rose barely discerned the Latin words. Retreating slightly as absolution was pronounced, when the door opened, she grabbed the man’s left wrist, slamming him against the wall and securing him with handcuffs.

News media across the country - print and television - reported on the arrest. Some reporters tried to make a connection between how the criminal sought forgiveness from the Church and the sexual abuse scandal involving so many priests.

Rose refuted that claim during Wednesday’s press conference. What she couldn’t deny, when confronted by Michael Hillebrand in private, is that she had eavesdropped on the sacrament.

“You can’t use his words against him in court,” he declared.

“I love you, Mikey, but you drive me nuts, y’know?”

“It’s the same as illegal search and seizure.”

“Bullshit.” Rose leaned back on the futon, massaging her aching leg muscles.

“He should’ve been read his rights...”

“The priests being subpoenaed will corroborate my theory, if he doesn’t confess on his own.”

Michael grunted, “He hasn’t?”

“He claims he’s been forgiven by God, so no judge can touch him.” She straightened. “The reason I asked you here is to see if you’d be willing to visit him at the detention center and explain, because he didn’t complete his penance, absolution was provisional and he’s still in a state of mortal sin.”

For once, she’d actually shocked this man who’d known her most of his life. His jaw dropped and he remained speechless for a good two minutes.

“Well?” she eventually prompted.

“I can’t determine the state of his soul...”

“Don’t give me that, Mikey. I know for a fact he confessed to you at St. Francis, and having confessed to you myself - a big mistake, mind you - I know you would’ve said the same thing Father Peters told him at St. Teresa’s. Now, you need to go and stress the fact God plays by certain rules...”

Michael hoisted himself off the recliner and snarled. “From the day Mom and Dad took you in, I knew you’d drive me to drink.”

“Likewise, dear brother. And, many nights, we’ve gotten drunk together. Stop making excuses and do this for me.”

“You still might be excommunicated, Rosie. The paperwork has been submitted to the Archbishop, signed by fifteen pastors...”

“The tentative date for my retirement has been set: one week after this guy is convicted by a jury of his peers and receives life without parole. Once we’re in Europe, who’ll know if I’m excommunicated or not?”

Hand on the doorknob, Michael glanced over his shoulder. “I will.”

Rose managed a wry grin. “I did what I had to do, Mikey. You know me, and you know that.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

They parted after exchanging a warm embrace.

Rose’s strategy worked; after Fr. Hillebrand paid a call on the suspected rapist, the man willingly admitted his misdeeds, ignoring the advice of legal counsel.

He’d been a diocesan seminarian years earlier, seduced by a server from the campus cafeteria, causing him to abandon his vocation. As much as he tried to lead an upstanding, normal life, his need for revenge against all women had overwhelmed him.

Psychological testing ordered by the presiding judge on a motion from the public defender’s office showed the accused competent to stand trial, and by the following spring, three consecutive life sentences made it clear he would never be free again.

The victims’ statements reflected their relief at this news, though the trauma inflicted would prolong their suffering.

Rose’s career with the Albuquerque Police Department was lauded during a private celebration at Sadie’s Restaurant the following Friday evening. The gold badge in a blue velvet case didn’t mean half as much as receiving the considerable reward offered by a consortium of local businesses for the capture of the serial rapist. With that, she’d purchased two airline tickets for Rome, and rented a posh villa.

She and Michael Hillebrand were dropped at the Albuquerque Sunport the following morning by a hired limousine. The Franciscan balked at such extravagance but, as she strode toward the glass doors, Rose announced, “Time to have some fun.”

Family Secret

She'd written ghost stories for the better part of her life. They'd been serialized in magazines, touted on best seller lists, and recreated on the silver screen.

Describing graveyards, old castles or abandoned galleons had become second nature to Callie Hart. Intricate details of misty manifestations or malevolent phantasms poured from her soul like a fountain.

She lived simply in the tiny red brick bungalow built by her maternal great-grandparents on a corner lot in the remote eastern Iowa town. Daily walks through the faded downtown merited her friendly greetings from other life-long residents. Most of the money she earned through her creativity funded local charities.

Regardless of the plots the blonde, middle-aged author devised - where unsuspecting youths encountered soul-wrenching phenomena - the fiction remained an illusion, her reality a rather dull existence.

Until that night beneath a blue blood moon.

Sitting at her desk in the dim study - once the second bedroom - she typed furiously on the laptop's keyboard. Dialogue filled the screen as two teenaged girls wandered through a stark winter forest.

A harsh wind blew beyond the window, rattling old metal framework. That sound, combined with shadows cast by the lone 40 watt bulb in an antique floor lamp, did not break her concentration.

She'd planned to finish this first draft before daybreak, the manuscript due to her publisher by week's end.

"You've a lot to learn," came a deep, ethereal voice from the doorway.

The chair swiveled so rapidly, Callie landed on the floor. She squinted to better focus on the intruder, but detected only a glint of reflected light in two mirrors hung on opposite walls years earlier by her grandmother. "Who's there?"

"The established question, more's the pity."

The woman could distinguish no tangible form. She slowly rose, a twinge in her right knee from striking the desk leg when she fell. Shuffling toward the light switch, she extended her hand...

To have it batted down by very solid fingers.

"Don't play into the erroneous stereotypes you've devised," the visitor boomed.

Her contralto tremored, "You're a ghost?"

"Your grandmother showed you my photo when you were twelve, but never explained how she acquired it."

“Orson Welles!” Callie gasped.

A rustling indicated movement, and she detected a vaguely tall, well-proportioned silhouette - not the Welles of later years, when he approached 400 pounds.

“I met her in June, 1944, while I was in Chicago doing radio broadcasts promoting war bonds. She was on a vacation with some friends, and our eyes met as we dined at separate tables in Berghoff’s that Tuesday...”

“Are you saying...”

“I’m your grandfather.”

Callie felt blood rush to her head; when she awoke, the spectre had vanished and daylight peeked through gaps in the curtained windows.

Limping to the kitchen, she brewed a pot of coffee and diverted to the bathroom with its ancient fixtures, to wash her face and stare at her disheveled appearance in the medicine chest mirror.

“I’m not crazy,” she muttered at the image. “I’m not.”

Memories flooded her brain of that day, decades ago: Margaret Judge, her grandmother, propped on pillows resembling an ailing queen with the bed’s massive carved walnut headboard as a backdrop. Arthritic hands had passed her a simple gold key.

“Open the bottom drawer,” the old woman quavered. “I want to show you something.”

Callie had followed instructions with the enthusiasm of a girl on a treasure hunt, crossing to the brass-trimmed wardrobe. She extracted a painted music box, which played a tinkling waltz.

The contents included Welles’ photo, two envelopes, and a diary. “Keep the key. These will be yours when I die,” Margaret had whispered. “Your grandpa didn’t know about this, nor does your mother.”

Lydia Hart, Callie’s mother, learned about the music box within a week, after Margaret passed away that very night. Mercenary impulses prompted Lydia to supervise Callie’s reluctant search of the bedroom’s every nook and cranny, and the entire house, believing a considerable fortune hidden within the walls - since the deceased’s bank account contained a mere \$14.

That greed may have been why Callie had been named as sole heir in Margaret’s will, though Lydia took advantage of the girl’s status as a minor to sell most of the furniture - valuable antiques among them - and spend the money.

Consigning her disappointment to paper had been the only way Callie could deal with the situation. Tales of avenging ghosts wreaking havoc on those who mishandled their legacies had been the start of her writing career.

After so many years, Callie enshrined herself in the living room recliner, a mug of steaming coffee beside her. She used the key - which she'd hung on a chain around her neck after hiding the music box from Lydia's prying eyes - to access Margaret's best kept secret.

The diary might have been considered a typical teenager's journal, until June, 1944. From silly comments about classmates and infatuations, the tone darkened considerably.

"I was so enjoying this trip to Chicago," her grandmother had scrawled around a photo of herself standing near Buckingham Fountain, taped to the page. "The museums, the food, the people.

"Last night, we splurged on dinner at Berghoff's. The five of us were clustered at a corner table, when who should walk in but Orson Welles and his actors. Having seen him in Jane Eyre just a few months ago, I could agree with Joan Fontaine's assessment that he wasn't handsome - not like Barney, anyway - but he could command the room with a glance."

The entry continued in a romance-induced prose. More than once through the meal, Welles had locked eyes with Margaret and, when she retired to the restroom to clean spilled gravy off her skirt, she found herself face-to-face with the "imposing presence" in a narrow corridor.

He urged her to sneak out the service entrance with him, and she could not refuse.

After a moonlit stroll through Grant Park, where he spoke of topics beyond her comprehension, he invited her to his room at a posh Michigan Avenue hotel.

Three weeks later - her high school sweetheart Barney Judge home on leave before shipping out for Europe - Margaret got married.

"I suspected I was pregnant with Orson's child, and this was the only way I could think to hide my shame," Callie's grandmother had concluded the diary.

Callie flipped back to the photo. Margaret's beauty had been genuine: bobbed blonde curls framing an innocent, delicate face, no make-up required. Little wonder Welles had pursued her, albeit briefly.

One of the envelopes contained a telegram from the War Department dated December, 1944, notifying Margaret Judge of her husband's valiant death in a battle along the German border. His body never returned home, Callie recalled.

A California postmark partially obscured the typewritten address on the other envelope. Nervous fingers drew out a folded sheet of linen stationery, a brief hand-written message signed, "I remain your obedient servant, Orson Welles."

In essence, he could not acknowledge the child, but had enclosed a \$10,000 check.

Margaret's father, while curious about the origins of the money, had wisely invested the windfall, allowing the young widow and her child to live in relative comfort. Lydia had told Callie that story many times.

"I never had the really nice clothes I wanted, though, nor any of the luxuries my friends enjoyed," Lydia complained on a regular basis as a way to justify her negative attitudes.

Even after Ross Hart built her a mansion on his ranch outside the town boundaries, the woman remained unhappy.

She died unhappy, as well, cancer having eaten away her bones.

Callie felt a droplet trickle down her cheek - not for her mother, but for her father, whose broken heart drove him to an early grave within a year of his wife's demise.

"The dead are better off dead," the basso profundo reverberated around the curved ceiling.

A glance across the cozy room showed the descending sun beyond the windows. The author had spent an entire day wrapped in the past.

Orson Welles had returned.

"Then, why are you here?" Callie puzzled.

"Unfinished business."

"With me?"

Taking shape in the diminishing light, he resembled the photo on the chair arm: black wavy hair, thick features, broad shoulders, black shirt and trousers. "You may not bear my name, but we share the same blood, the same drive, the same skill to transmute the effusive fodder of the mind into substance. Yet, your writing does me no credit."

She rose and still he towered over her. "Now, wait a minute..." she protested. "I live by the pen, and very well, too."

He snorted, "Commercial trash."

"How dare you..."

"You may not be aware I started *my* career as a writer. Without the written word, no performances on the stage, radio or screen would transpire."

"I get that," Callie admitted, moving to close the draperies.

"The scripts I wrote were *not* based on some untalented executive's concept of commercial. I was true to my art, expressing my dreams, goals and desires, and damn the money."

"*Citizen Kane* was voted the best American movie ever made, and your cuckoo clock speech in *The Third Man* is often cited as proof of your genius."

A slight smile played upon his sensuous lips. "Ah, you know my work?"

"Around the time Grandma showed me your photo, video tapes were just becoming popular. I watched the movies, curious about who you were and why she might have your photo in a box in a locked drawer!"

"Be that as it may, in the initial release, the movies you mentioned did not impress the studio heads with their earnings."

"What has that to do with me?" Callie prodded.

He caught her hand as she reached for the lamp switch, pulling her onto the sofa cushions. "These ghost stories you write could be equated to movies like *The Black Rose* or *Prince of Foxes*, in which I acted only for the paycheck, to finance my production of *Othello*."

"The stories do... keep me in bread and board."

"That's not enough!" Welles chided, cradling her fingers with long, delicate digits, scrutinizing her features with intense hazel orbs. "Isn't there an embryonic scenario nestled in the recesses of your soul, aching to be released onto paper?"

"I... never thought about it."

"Well, do. When the inspiration begins bubbling to the surface, let it have free reign, always following through to the project's completion, for your own sanity."

Releasing her hand, he grasped her shoulders and raised her upright. He bent and kissed both her cheeks. "You are as beautiful as Margaret was, and I'm sorry I couldn't be part of your life."

As she watched, he dissipated, leaving her in darkness.

In more ways than one.

Callie didn't sleep, didn't eat or touch the computer for days after that. She stopped taking her daily walks, leading some of the townsfolk to call or knock on her door to check her well being.

She told each of them she was fleshing out the idea for a new book.

They respected her privacy on that note, having honored her more than once for her contributions to the community, and her prowess with the pen, by inviting her to hold book signings at the library and lecture to the senior club.

It took two weeks, she missed two deadlines for magazines expecting short stories, then the dam burst.

Typing furiously on the keyboard, Callie created a vivid world of pirates, noble ladies, political intrigue, and debauchery. The first draft - more than 100,000 words - was completed in ten days.

Using Welles as the pirate captain/hero and herself as their heroine - father and daughter, ostensibly - eliminated the incestuous possibility of a

romance between the two. The captain did, as suited that era, go wenching, while his daughter remained practical until meeting a young survivor of a raided frigate, who happened to be the son of Jamaica's governor.

As she finished the final chapters in the wee hours of a Sunday morning, she heard Welles' voice, "Yes, yes. Excellent!"

The process, of course, didn't end when the last period appeared on the screen. Callie's practice was to lay aside the first draft - working on other stories in the interim - then go back to proofread and objectively edit not once, but twice.

Apologizing to the periodical editors for her lateness, Callie submitted stories that had been half-complete prior to what she termed her "adventure novel." What she would do with that tome, though, she hadn't a clue.

It wasn't... commercial.

Despite the strain on her system, the enjoyment of writing it could not be topped. Even if the printout merely occupied a corner of her desk for the next ten years, the memory of that sensation would renew her to continue in her chosen profession.

The unexpected phone call a wintry Friday morning changed those plans. Callie heard the ringing as she shoveled the front sidewalk and disregarded the noise, until it rang three times in succession.

Shedding her knit hat and gloves as she stomped snow off her boots on the doormat, she snatched the receiver to hear the publisher who had printed her last best seller on the line.

"We're looking for something different, given readers' current tastes," he stated. "Have you anything new?"

She promised to email him the manuscript within an hour. Three days later, she received an electronic reply offering her a fantastic sum, with a Hollywood production company already interested in the movie rights.

Callie leaned back on the mesh-backed desk chair with a smile. "Thank you... Grandfather," she whispered. "My only question is: what next?"

His voice echoed around the chamber. "There is always another story to be told, as I proved to my dying day."

She felt his hands squeeze her shoulders as encouragement then... nothing.

Callie never encountered the ghost again, nor did she write any more ghost stories. She decided the real thing couldn't be matched on paper, her mind conjuring many other tales as the years progressed.

A Right To Be Angry

Throughout her life, she'd never let anyone trample her under foot. More than five decades had seen her asserting an innate strength - the source of which not exactly clear. She'd weathered emotional storms which would have drowned other, less hardy souls, and always made it safely to shore.

Not this time.

She had no grasp of why this particular situation had torn her apart so completely, why a mere man had ripped out her heart and left her slowly bleeding away her life.

As she attempted - often in vain and with a great deal of tears - to pull together the scattered ashes of her existence, an anger rose in her which defied control.

Not even a licensed clinical counselor could calm her during their twice-weekly sessions, once this hideous rage manifested.

"No one does this to me and waltzes away scot-free," she hissed, grabbing her parka as she departed the psychologist's tiny office.

"What will you do?" queried the professional, pen poised above her weekly planner, no future appointment forthcoming.

"I'm not sure yet."

She knew, deep within, this albeit negative emotion should have been vocalized months earlier, in the midst of the chaos which had claimed her mind. She should have brought the untenable arrangement to a screeching halt, but had let her predominant sense of hyper-responsibility hold sway. She should have told him exactly what she thought of him...

Too late for that now. Even though their paths still periodically crossed, and her line of work involved speaking with him on occasion, he chose to blatantly ignore her - setting her nerves on edge anew with each strained encounter, and driving her blood pressure beyond dangerous levels.

Thus, she laid awake nights, considering modes of vengeance. Burning his dwelling, and every building on the property, would have been simple. Yet, she realized, he would feel no remorse about such a loss. Material possessions meant nothing to him; people meant nothing to him.

He often claimed to "have no heart," and she'd discovered the truth of the statement.

He cared for nothing except his own reputation.

In a vocation where the requirements included showing compassion for those less fortunate, on the margins, and impoverished, he isolated himself from the people, showed contempt for their beliefs and disdain for their culture.

Driving across the city, she determined that he didn't deserve to live.

Afternoon traffic forced her to circle the block twice before she could maneuver the blue Mustang into the turn lane and swing through the strip mall parking lot. The pawn shop display cases contained a wide variety of pistols, with shotguns and rifles locked in a glass cabinet behind the owner's desk.

Fifteen minutes later, she loaded a nondescript package in her trunk. Then, she hit an ATM and withdrew the maximum amount allowed.

The car's tank filled with fuel, she steered onto the interstate, covering 150 miles in just under two hours, swearing at the semi tractor-trailers who invariably cut her off while trying to pass slower vehicles.

Clouds obscured the moon as tires crunched gravel on an unpaved track, a fortuitous omen in her mind. His Subaru mud-splashed in its traditional space - thanks to recent rains - reassured her this plan would not be thwarted.

The sole illumination an overhead security lamp near the road, she unwrapped the 9mm Glock, loaded the bullets and inserted the magazine in the handgrip. Lightly, she trod packed earth toward the brick structure.

She didn't bother to knock on the warped wood door. Adrenaline pumping through her veins, she kicked in the panel, ready for his anticipated reaction.

Newspaper in hand, the greying, thin figure of a former athlete rounded the corner from his study; he'd been working on a crossword puzzle, as was his wont of an evening. Hazel orbs widened at the sight of her.

"What the hell..."

"That's where you're going," she responded, her weapon's muzzle wedged beneath his chin almost instantly.

His superior demeanor vanished as he begged her to reconsider, to show mercy. As she recounted his abuse, his insults, his lies, he apologized repeatedly.

She would not grant him forgiveness, because she knew he didn't mean one word.

Backing him against the wall, she adjusted her stance so, the trigger pulled, lead would pierce his heart, as his behavior had pierced hers so frequently.

And, she would never be caught. Out in the wilds of the desert, he wouldn't be found for days. The pistol, her jacket and gloves, would be disposed of in a random dumpster, and she would be over the border in short order, never to be heard from again.

"No, no..." he pleaded, cheeks damp.

She chuckled, "Oh, yes. You'll never inflict such agony on anyone ever again."

Withdrawing two steps, she didn't expect him to collapse on the carpet. The delay aggravated her further.

“Get up,” she ordered, metal meeting his perspiration-drenched forehead. His limbs jello, he gradually righted himself.

She didn’t wait for additional stunts. The shot echoed through the canyon and, for a brief second, she believed it might have been heard by the nearest neighbors, a mile distant.

Peeling off the blood-spattered parka, stuffing fingerless black leather in the pockets, she glanced over her shoulder at his crumpled form as she inhaled deeply, relief complete.

She eventually received an email from a co-worker that his body had been discovered when he didn’t return to the office after the holiday weekend. The police concluded he’d confronted a burglar.

Sipping her martini, she leaned back on a woven lounge, playfully dug her toe in the white, ocean-soaked sand, and smiled as the sun descended over the distant horizon.

A Treasured Valley

Multiple generations had been born and died since they'd migrated to the land-locked valley. A severely misogynistic culture, the natives elevated Serlee to the status of a god on his 90th birthday, having survived far beyond masses who never saw 35 summers. Ledann, however, was relegated to mere acolyte, despite being six years older than her companion. She was also banned from setting foot in the "temple" she'd designed and monitored being constructed five decades earlier.

That such discrimination persisted through subsequent centuries irked the woman no end. She'd given up explaining their names were actually pronounced Lady Ann - as in Lady Ann Kincaid - and Sir Leigh Kincaid, the second son of a noble house, who'd fled the family estate when the Duke, long dead, refused to set him up with a regular income after he was expelled from university.

Her white waist-length mane billowed in the light breeze as she sat on a curved stone bench in the park beside a lake fed by mountain streams, where a more-than-lifesized stone statue of Leigh held a place of honor in the city. When word circulated that their deity had returned to heaven, Ann couldn't help laughing into the sleeve of her flowing blue robe.

Heaven, indeed, she mused. He'd tired ages since of dallying with the local wenches - each red-haired, pale, slender, and no more than five feet in height - rejected the idea of taking any particular one as his consort. Being the object of adulation bored him but, had he tried to squelch their devotion, the situation would have rapidly devolved into chaos.

Leigh - still fit and agile after so many years, his height and massive frame intimidating - had stuffed a collection of hand-stitched trousers and shirts into a silk bed sheet, tied the four corners, slung it over his shoulder and beat a retreat through the same tunnel, hidden behind a jagged outcropping, he and Ann had been exploring when they discovered this isolated, mysterious settlement.

Ann had urged him to include the journal she'd maintained as proof of his inexplicably advanced age and whereabouts; he refused. "Better no one know about this place," he rumbled in a deep bass register. "They're too backward to attempt modernizing."

She chuckled at the memory. Modern, for the pair, had been carriages and muskets. She could only imagine how far the outside world had progressed in their absence.

Hell, she'd lost track of the date, able to guess only by the cycle of the seasons.

The question of why the natives died so young, yet she and Leigh continued to thrive occupied much of her days. She'd deliberated whether an inadequate diet impacted their growth and development, something in the air... According to their own history - which had taken her considerable effort to translate - thus had always been their fate.

These reflections dispelled as a young family - mother, father and six youngsters - approached the statue and laid a bouquet of flowers at the base. Then, simultaneously, they dropped to their knees and performed their obeisance: three bows with their foreheads touching the ground.

Ann's brown eyes rolled skyward at the ridiculous nature of these customs, and what usually transpired next.

The man - tanned and wiry - approached hesitantly. He reached for Ann's hand and reverently placed assorted metal coins on her palm.

"We plead that Serlee grant our petitions," he babbled in his native tongue.

He retracted his fingers; Ann grabbed them and returned the contribution. "Keep your money. Buy food for your children."

Smiling, the group backed away with a series of slight bows, only turning to walk away after they lost sight of her behind a tall hedge.

She shook her head, amused. If she'd accepted all the offerings, she'd have been wealthy beyond her wildest dreams.

To what end?

In a land where growing crops took the fore, and the simple tasks of basic living busied the populace, on what could she spend the excess?

Clouds converged overhead; a storm would spoil the prospect of a pleasant evening. Ann rose and sidled toward a modest stone dwelling opposite the "temple" - a vast three-story mansion similar to the Duke's estate - where a steady stream of believers gathered for the daily service.

Leigh had never imparted the tenets of his personal philosophy to the congregation: greed, lust and leisure. He delegated the burden of being high priest to a rather unscrupulous appointee; that con-artist created a bizarre set of doctrines and, in time, passed the sceptre of authority to an equally repulsive nephew, so that the umpteenth descendant of this dysfunctional clan currently held the post.

Adherents to this bogus faith delivered one in ten of the domesticated mountain goats used for milk and meat each summer, or a commensurate portion of their grain to support the temple, so neither Leigh nor his designated representative needed to soil their hands with manual labor.

Ann hadn't agreed with Leigh's decision, but she could not voice her objections publicly without fear of reprisals - or execution - in a dale where females received little education, were selected as mates by their 14th spring, bore their men heirs and kept the house.

She avoided the liturgies, preferring to promote peace and justice by whatever means she could.

She'd recognized, too, that the women were growing increasingly restless, fed up with being treated like ignorant domestic servants. Early mornings, while their husbands and sons slept, Ann opened the temple's library for classes in mathematics, literature and science, gratified how their minds blossomed as they acquired the rudiments of knowledge.

Revolution on the horizon, she would've enjoyed participating in the process. The high priest, however, discovering her treason, ordered her arrest and home confinement under guard.

That villainous cleric declared his verdict - without trial - on a warm autumn morning, standing beneath the statue: the "security of the community" required Ann's beheading.

This action proved the tipping point for the females. They grabbed their carving knives, brooms, hoes and shovels to commence a war of emancipation.

Ann shuffled among corpses in the streets as the sun's rays faded over the mountains hours later. The men, caught unarmed, could not defend themselves against the irate combatants. The high priest, a noose encircling his neck, dangled beneath the temple's colonnade - an unmistakable warning to any who would impose their shallow dictates on others.

Burying the dead dragged over the course of weeks. Ann's palms sported callouses from hard labor and, soaking them in a basin of water as light snow fell outside the window, she heard an ominous pounding in the distance.

She bundled herself in a heavy cloak and ventured outdoors. Using block and tackle, along with sheer force of will, the women toppled Leigh's statue from its pedestal. This final remnant of the old regime, and those singular chiseled features, shattered on the grass.

"We're going to replace him with an image of you!" cried one of the mothers, hands bleeding from rope burns.

Ann shut down that idea immediately. "No! I'll not be worshiped as anyone's god. You are responsible for your own well being, as I've taught you. Make your own future without such nonsense."

Despite their protests, she held firm, eventually reaching a compromise to serve as advisor while they devised a structure of government to ensure the needs of all were met, with equality guaranteed.

They converted the temple into a school, with Ann training suitable teachers. Her compensation included a suite on the third floor - the same rooms she'd originally occupied before the whole god debacle - and spent afternoons watching children play from the balcony outside her windows.

Sitting on the woven seat that spring day, she heard an eerie rumble originating from beneath the soil.

Or, at least, from within the surrounding mountains.

Not wishing to upset the natives, she grabbed her walking stick - the sole present she accepted during the transition, a token of her wisdom and guidance - and hiked up the slope beyond the village to the crag concealing the tunnel, where the thrumming nearly deafened her.

She retreated only seconds before a behemoth crashed through the rockface: metal, self-propelled on eight gigantic wheels, a rapidly spinning cone attached to the front.

Behind this marvel, other conveyances emerged into the daylight - eight in all. Dozens of men in strange clothing scrambled from within cloth-draped compartments, bearing terrifying weapons.

In the midst of this parade, a familiar form stood atop a flat surface to survey the valley. Dark mane rustled by the wind, spine straight and shoulders squared, clad in black fabric the cut of which Ann had never seen, he pointed toward the cluster of houses. As he descended a ladder to ground level, he glimpsed the woman, squinting unblinking blue orbs.

"Ann?" Highly polished boots strode toward her, arms extended.

She recoiled. "By all that's logical, Leigh, what's going on?"

White teeth shown in a sardonic smile. "You'd never believe it, my dear sister. I may have been a god in this primitive realm but, out there, I was heralded as the oldest living human being. Once I proved my claim with records from the archives housed at what had been father's estate, wealth and honors were heaped upon me... and the technology!" He waved his arm at the transports. "It's 2158, and this is only a fraction of the innovations seen since we set out on our travels in 1407."

"Then, why return?" Ann queried.

"Research, my dear. Scientific research. Among this crowd are the finest doctors and biologists on the planet. They want to discover the source of our longevity, and the reason your... friends die so young."

"How will they accomplish this task?"

"Blood tests, genetic sampling, DNA testing. They plan to build a laboratory on-site, and won't give up until they find the answers."

Ann took an unyielding stance. "No."

Leigh's laugh reverberated over the valley. "What do you mean, 'No'? You don't have a say in the matter. The high priest..."

"Is no more. There's been a... revolution in your absence, my dear brother, and I won't have you disrupting this society."

"You can't stop us. If you try, everyone will die."

She smirked. "I advise you to turn around and go back from whence you came. Live your life as you wish, out there, but don't bother us with this foolishness."

Massive paws seized her arms. "Don't you understand? Out there, people fear death. They're desperate for a way to live beyond seventy or eighty years. When these men crack the secret of what happened to us..."

"So the masses can tire of the daily grind, like you did? What kind of life is that?" retorted Ann. "Leave now, or be subject to the consequences of your intrusion."

Leigh released his grip, suspicious. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said." She gazed at the sun's position. "You have until sunset."

She had no illusions that Leigh and his entourage would comply with her request. As she retraced the route to the village, the troop began unloading crates and items she could not have described in words.

When Leigh led a procession along the main thoroughfare as families gathered for their evening meal, none of those who peered through open doorways and unshuttered windows offered any manner of recognition. The era of blind worship had ended.

Ann, observing the spectacle from the front steps of the temple-cum-school, shrugged at his dismay.

"What's the deal?" Leigh prodded.

"Like any civilization, we've matured, evolved."

"Ah, no matter." He signaled a squad forward. "Select two dozen adults, and equal numbers of teenagers and children and prepare them for the blood tests."

Abruptly, an armed cadre of locals appeared. "You're in violation of my mandate, brother," Ann warned.

The contrast between the pair amplified by their proximity - Ann's features still fresh and youthful, Leigh with touches of grey at the temples, wrinkles on his brow - he chortled, "Do you grasp the damage that can be done by the rifles these men possess? Imagine, dear sister, a hundred arrows sent aloft in concert, from one single barrel..."

Ann didn't flinch at this proclamation. With the odds six to one, Leigh's platoon had no opportunity to raise their firearms. Deft hands confiscated the lot, bending the metal into useless scrap like branches in the breeze.

"What the..." Leigh gasped.

"One thing you never noticed while you lived here, brother: the reason these people live such short lives. They are gifted with extraordinary strength from birth. Unfortunately, that strength expends itself before they can properly age. As we speak, the instruments in which you put so much faith for your research have been reduced to little more than dust. And, if you don't immediately march straight back to those hideous contraptions on the hill, they'll be destroyed, as well."

In response, Leigh drew a knife from a sheath on his belt and thrust it into Ann's torso. Instantly mobbed, the trespassers had no chance to save themselves.

Leigh, bloodied and broken, glared up at his sibling with those blue eyes. He stammered, "Why?" then collapsed in a heap.

For her part, Ann shook her head in sorrow. "Why did he never learn?"

Two attendants inspected her robe for red stains where the blade had penetrated, finding only a tear in the cloth.

She snickered, unfastening the rope holding a flattened skillet around her midsection. "Knowing my brother - even after all these years - I was taking no risks."

Another burial detail performed a solemn duty, others creating an impenetrable barrier at the tunnel entrance with vehicles upended and jammed into the gap.

Ann resumed her routine, content that - through the foreseeable future - peace would reign in this tiny domain.