

# THE ASCENSION

By

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for Joe

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## THE FIRST SUNDAY

***TWELVE** silent figures congregate softly around an unlit fire. Swathed in black robes, they sit perfectly still, flinching neither muscle nor sinew, the only sound piercing the inky darkness the slow and occasional hiss of silent, ancient breath. They huddle together, not for warmth, nor companionship, but in patient supplication, waiting, as they have for centuries, ever forbearing, ever vigilant, ever hopeful.*

*Tonight, their wait will not be in vain.*

*The gentle rustle of the tent flap announces his presence. With reverent steps the man enters into their midst. They know him. They know him of old. He left them once, long ago. Patiently they have awaited his return.*

*And now he has come.*

*In his hands he carries a blade, a curved, ancient weapon. It is heavy with the lives of untold legions, their crimson screams and eviscerated innards rusting the metal of the knife. He throws the blade into their midst. It lands with a dull sound onto the dusty earth at their feet. The figures stir. They can still smell the death that clings to its curve. Twelve empty faces turn at once and peer into the eyes of the man who has come.*

*It can only mean one thing.*

*“Kill them. Kill them all.”*

# MONDAY

**BISHOP** Gregory Okeke was late. Very late. So kissing his little sister one last time and waving good-bye to her family, he rushed into his black Lexus sedan. It had been a good day. They had gone to a humble traveling circus, the Bishop's niece and nephew screaming on all the rides and marveling at the few animals the decrepit sideshow still maintained. He didn't see the kids very often, so the Bishop allowed himself to be persuaded into staying on, first for dinner, then for coffee, then to read the kids a bedtime story. Now, still stuffed to the gills with Loretta's infamous baby back ribs and collard greens, and flushed with the warmth of an excellent Chianti, the Bishop turned over his ignition and started up the car. It was almost midnight; he was supposed to have been back to the diocese no later than nine.

The Bishop sighed in contentment as he gently steered the car out of Loretta's neatly appointed driveway. He had needed this Memorial Day away. When he was first offered the post of bishop, everything had seemed wonderful. Pennsylvania was where he had grown up. He had spent his childhood as an altar boy at the small St. Gildas' parish in tiny Lower Saucon, right across the border from New Jersey. Okeke hated leaving his growing congregation in L.A., not to mention the far more hospitable climate, but the move would allow him to be closer to home, to his sister and old friends. Being offered such an important post at a relatively young age proved hard to resist—by accepting the position, Okeke became the youngest bishop in the entire United States. It was his chance to make a real impact, to reach out to the community, to help grow the diocese and its congregations. It was a real opportunity.

But that was before he realized the nightmare he had inherited. Bishop O'Malley, the previous leader of the diocese, had not only allowed two priests accused of harming children into his church, he had given them each congregations of their own. To let those monsters back out into the public...to allow them to have contact with children...Okeke seethed when he thought of it. How could any man do that, let alone a man of God? And even though it had all happened twenty years ago, it was only now, after the hue and cry of what had happened in Boston, and Chicago, and Phoenix, and North Carolina, and so on and so forth all around the country, that the victims had come forward here. O'Malley had retired in disgrace, and Okeke, unaware of what was going on, had inherited several damaging lawsuits and a congregation bitterly distrustful of church authority.

Eventually the lawsuits were settled, though of course the real harm—those poor boys and girls—could never be healed through financial reparations. The money was only cold comfort for what they had endured. Okeke felt that the victims had rights to every penny, and then some. The church—*his* church—had lost its way.

It was a cool night for late May, though the weather was expected to warm by tomorrow. The new moon made the night seem even colder than it was. Okeke knew Pennsylvania well, but he had only been in Chambersburg a few times, mostly on holiday visits to Loretta's house, the only family he had left. The drive back to Harrisburg would take at least an hour, and until he hit the highway the roads were dark and unfamiliar. Still, Okeke found it hard to focus on driving.

His mind reeled back to his flock's troubles. The lawsuits may have been settled, but the real task still lay before him. The congregation needing healing. It needed to regain its trust in the church. But how to do that? Okeke wasn't quite sure, but he did know one thing—he was the man to begin the healing process.

His parents had come to Pennsylvania from West Africa, settling into the small, rural community outside of Allentown after escaping a brutal civil war back home. They were one of the few black families in town, and Okeke remembered everyday the taunts and insults while waiting for the bus to school. Even in high school, even after ten years in the town, Okeke did not fit in. Growing up, he had felt torn between two worlds, the very traditional way of life his parents

cultivated at home, and the slow but steady encroachment of 1970's America, where, even in a small Pennsylvania coal town, free thinking and free love seemed more than possible. It was in the church where Okeke found his two worlds met, in the good will and community fellowship he felt every time mass was celebrated, and in the mysterious sacraments of God, in the transubstantiation of the Host. Even now, even as Bishop, Okeke was still awed every time he performed the sacred act, every time he lofted up the body and blood of his Lord Jesus Christ. It was there, amongst everyday miracles and good, kindly people, that Okeke found a home. He became good friends with Father Macnamara, a doddering but witty and educated man. When he was a child, Father Macnamara would regale Okeke with tales from the Bible or lives of the saints. When he grew older, Father Macnamara encouraged Okeke to enter the priesthood himself. The good Father had died almost fifteen years ago, but Okeke was proud that he had lived long enough to see Okeke take his orders. The torch had been passed.

Okeke's mind snapped back to driving as a yellow sign entered his limited field of vision. DETOUR. An arrow pointed to the left, to a small, unpaved back road. Muttering softly to himself, Okeke turned the car left. He hoped this road would lead to the interstate.

There is so much work to do, he thought. So much damage has been done. So much destruction. But he was energetic and eternally hopeful. The wounds must be healed. The church could be made whole again. The people never lost faith in Christ; it was only Christ's keepers here on earth who had failed them. But as long as they had faith, Okeke thought, as long as they believed, he could reach them. He must reach them. It was his duty and his privilege. He must succeed.

WHAM!

A sudden crashing, thumping sound and the lurching of the car as it drove over a large, solid object snapped Okeke back to reality. Panicked, he slammed on the brakes, threw the car in park, and froze. He had hit something. He had hit something hard. It had been dark, and his mind had been wandering. Okeke could see nothing in the dim red glow his tail lights proffered, and listening intently, he only heard the hum of the car. What had he hit? He vaguely recalled seeing a shape the instant before the car hit it. The shape had been dark, and it was dark outside, terribly dark, but Okeke thought, or he remem-

bered, or he believed, that it had been a man. That it looked like a man, like a human being. Okeke wondered if his mind was playing tricks on him in his panic. What would a man be doing on this road in total darkness on a night like this?

Okeke gripped the steering wheel hard, his knuckles turning white with exertion, as his frantic mind raced over his options. He could run, leave the scene and never look back. He didn't know what he hit—it could easily have been an animal or a tree limb knocked down by a storm. He didn't know for sure; he didn't *know* anything. So he should find out. Make sure it was an animal or a tree. He could easily check. Just take a quick look. It was the right thing to do. If it was a man, and he was hurt...he would need help. An ambulance. Okeke knew some basic first aid. Mouth to mouth. He could help.

But...but what if it had been a man. What if he had hit a man, or even a child? A boy, playing in the rain, a boy hurt like all those other boys had been hurt. It was an accident, just an accident, but everyone would know, everyone would know what he had done because it would be all over the news, a huge scandal. Okeke would be ruined, forced to resign. The Bishop paused. He had hit the object hard. Really hard. It must be dead. Right? It had gone under his wheels. He had driven over it. Whatever it is, whatever it *was*, it must be dead. He had run it over! There was nothing he could do. This man—if it were indeed a man—could not be saved, not by him, not by anyone. Why ruin two lives?

No! his mind shouted. You must help him. It was a man. I don't know that! I don't know anything at all. I will be believed. It was dark. Very dark. They have to believe me! It was an accident. I must be believed! It was an accident!

None of that will matter.

Okeke's hand hovered over his shift. Stay or go? He had to make a decision. But he couldn't decide. His hand touched the shift. Without thinking, he moved to take it out of park.

In the corner of his eye, in his rearview mirror, Okeke saw something. Motion. It was indistinct at first, but as it rose, Okeke clearly saw what it was. It was a man. And he was alive. He was alive! Okeke's joy quickly turned to puzzlement. The man was swathed in a long black robe and cowl that hid his face, his hands, everything. Okeke's eyes were glued to his mirror. He watched as the man slowly rose, and then, with a sudden motion, the man was instantly erect.

There was only darkness where his face should have been, and this darkness stared down hatefully at the Bishop. Okeke knew fear.

Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong.

The dark shape continued staring at the bishop through the mirror, as if peering right into his eyes, right into his soul. Okeke panicked. No man could be unhurt after being hit by a moving car, not like that. Something was terribly, terribly wrong. For an anxious moment the two stayed locked as they were, the dark man staring right into Okeke, the Bishop unable to take his panicked eyes off the figure in his rearview mirror. Okeke's heart raced; frantic gasping whimpers came out of his mouth. Something was terribly, horribly, grotesquely wrong.

The dark figure took a step forward.

The figure's motion shocked Okeke into action. His eyes left the mirror and peered into the road ahead. His hand once again hovered over the shift. He needed to go, to drive. He needed to go. Now.

It took an instant for his eyes to adjust to the brightness of his headlights, but in that instant Okeke saw not one dark figure, but several, all in front of his car, linked together, forming a semi-circle around him, blocking his path. Okeke stifled a scream. The black spaces where their faces should be seemed to absorb the light from his car. Okeke panicked. Frantically, his mind fumbled for a plan, for what to do. He looked in the rearview again. He saw no figure back there. A terrible sense of dread overtook his body.

He looked at the figures in front of him. They had not moved. They were the size of men. They must be men, only men, Okeke tried to rationalize, but they seemed to him an impenetrable wall. Then, Okeke knew. He knew. Somehow, in the midst of his panic and fear, he knew.

He knew he was going to die.

The dark figure he had hit was no longer behind him. *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee*, Okeke prayed. It was on his side, slowly approaching the driver's door. *Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus*. The dark man raised his right fist. Only now did Okeke see flesh, gray, cold flesh. *Holy Mary, Mother of God...* the fist pounded the glass once, and a small crack appeared ... *pray for us sinners...* a second time, pound ... *now* ... again, pound ... *now* ... again, pound ... *and at the hour...* once more and the glass shattered, showering Okeke with slivery bits of broken window... *at the*

*hour of...* the hand grabbed Okeke's collar. Okeke gasped and screamed. Another one of the figures moved forward...his right hand held a large, sickle-shaped blade...*at the hour of...*the hand was slowly raised...*at the hour of my death...*

*Amen.*

## TUESDAY

**DETECTIVE** Caldwell “Cal” Evans was nervous. He had parked his car outside the crime scene ten minutes ago, but he was still sitting in it, the steady blast of the air conditioning keeping back the anxious sweat that threatened to creep down his forehead. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel with the steady *tat tat tat* of a man about to do something he didn’t want to, or hadn’t done, in a long, long time. “Fuck,” he muttered to himself, turning off the car’s ignition for the third time.

Cal wasn’t used to being nervous, and he didn’t like how it felt.

“Goddamnit!” he said, slamming his hands on the wheels. “God-damn you Dan, you asshole!” Cal took a deep breath—one, then two, then three—and tried to settle himself. *Fuck this*, he thought. With a sudden lurch he yanked open the car door, stepped out, and squinted into the bright morning sunlight. He put sunglasses on over his eyes and dug around in his pocket for some identification. With a grunt, he strode towards the all-too-familiar yellow “Do Not Cross” police tape.

He was still nervous. But he was also mightily pissed.

Cal Evans was a tall man, well over six feet. He was a former football jock who found as he crept closer and closer to forty and further and further from thirty that his athletic frame was slowly starting to sag, thanks in no small part to a steady diet of cheeseburgers, bacon, ketchup and mustard, with just the tiniest hint of lettuce to appease his body’s need for vitamins and minerals. Still, he carried

his weight well, and with a thick shock of blond hair—most of it still there—and icy blue eyes, he cut a handsome figure. He was also, however, a formidable-looking man when he needed to be, and right now, he needed it in spades.

The officer working the crime scene perimeter recognized Cal before he even flashed his ID. She waved him on through with a small gulp and an even smaller smile. He'd said only two words to her: "Where's Dan?" She had pointed with a casual nod of her head and Cal had strolled off angrily in the same direction. The smile grew bigger. Cal's look could only mean one thing.

"Dan! Dan!" Sheriff Dan Moore turned to face the voice that called him. He'd been expecting this. "What the fuck, Dan? What the fuck?"

Dan held up his hands in front of Cal. "Calm down, Cal," he said patiently. "Let me explain."

"Explain? What's there to explain? We had a deal. We had—an arrangement. Two months was all I asked. Two months was what I needed. I went to you Dan, as a co-worker—hell, man, as a friend. Two months. And it's been—" Cal consulted his watch to make his point more effective—"not even five weeks and you call me in on some shit like this?"

Dan calmly stared Cal in the eye. "You done?"

"No! No, I'm not done! I'm not even supposed to be here, Dan. Fuck, you know that!"

"I do, Cal, I really do."

"Then why Dan? Why call me in on this?"

Dan took his opportunity. He pointed a stern finger at Cal. "Because I need you, Detective Evans. This thing here is bigger than both of us."

Cal shook his head and lowered his voice. "That's easy for you to say, Dan. Do you know I had to sign out to get here? I literally had to check myself out. It was fucking humiliating, Dan."

"Yeah, I know, Cal, I know, but I need my best man on this, really, I do."

"Dan, I'm not your best man anymore. I'm no good to you at all like this. Just let me go back. Or go home."

"I wish I could buddy, I really do, but I can't, I need you here."

"Yeah, well, fuck you!" Cal suddenly shouted. All eyes at the crime scene turned to face Cal. They'd seen him like this before. "You

know something, Dan, I don't need this fucking job, I don't need this fucking town, I don't need any of it, and most of all I don't need some pencil-dicked, small town *politician* running my ass into the ground simply because it's a fucking election year! I'll just quit this fucking job and screw you all! How do you like that?"

"Fine!" Dan bellowed back. Cal was surprised. Dan almost never yelled—it was one of the things that made him a good sheriff. "You can quit, for all I fucking care. You've quit on everything else in your life, and Lord knows I don't need all the fucking headaches you cause me. Hell, after the shit you pulled I should've fired you myself. But not today, you hear me? You are *not* quitting today. Tomorrow, next Wednesday, when you solve this case, yes, quit. Do us all a favor and quit. But right now I need you, goddamnit. I need my best man on this case, you hear me? And like it or not, you are it."

Cal took a deep breath. Dan saw that getting angry had been the right approach. "I'm sorry, Dan," Cal said quietly. "It's just—it's been so hard, without—"

Dan clapped a meaty hand on Cal's shoulder. "I know, I know. And when this is over you can go back—take a vacation—quit if you really like. But this is bigger than both of us."

"You got Ramirez...give it to Ramirez."

"Ramirez is a rookie, barely been a detective for six months. He's never done a homicide before. He's in way over his head. It's been all I can do to keep him from contaminating the crime scene. You should know how lousy he is," Dan added with the hint of a smile. "You trained him."

"Nice," Cal said, feeling a bit less nervous and a whole lot less pissed off.

"Look, Cal, I know this isn't easy for you, but this is big, you hear me? Bigger than both our problems. I need you on this. Otherwise...otherwise I'll have to call in the Feds." Dan was lying, but he knew how much this would piss Cal off. "If you can't handle it, buddy, if you honest to godness can't handle it, let me know, and I'll put the call into FBI headquarters myself."

Talking about the Feds always stirred Cal. "Dan, you know I worked with those assholes for ten years when I pounded a beat in D.C."

"I know."

"We don't need them here in Chambersburg, Dan."

“We don’t?”

“No,” Cal said with more confidence than he felt. “You got me.”

“Good.” Dan smiled, clapped Cal on the shoulder again. “Get in there and show the rookie how it’s done.” He started to walk off.

“Dan?” Cal called. Dan stopped. “Why’s this one so special anyway?”

“You don’t know?” Cal shook his head. Dan looked incredulous. “That’s the Bishop in that car, Cal.”

“Bishop of who?”

“Jesus Christ,” Dan said. “Sobering up hasn’t smartened you up, that’s for sure. The Bishop of fucking Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Big time holy man. This one’s gonna bring national coverage. All the networks have already called in. The media is gonna be all over us. The fucking Vatican themselves are gonna be all over us.” Dan paused. “So now you understand why I need you on this?”

“Yeah,” Cal said, feeling more nervous than ever. “I won’t let you down,” he added, not believing it.

Dan reached out to shake his hand. “It’s good to have you back, Cal.”

“**SO** what’s the story?” Cal said to the medical examiner. She had just finished examining the body for the second time, being as thorough as possible. “Got a preliminary report for me?” Cal thought it best to talk to her before he surveyed the scene. *Take it easy*, he said to himself.

The ME stood erect to give Cal her report. “Death was likely caused by a large stab wound to the heart. Shredded most of the muscle there and the aorta as well.”

“Likely,” Cal said, picking up on her language. “What’s so fucking ‘likely’ about a shredded heart?”

The ME shrugged. “Three of the wounds could have been the fatal blow. One to the neck, the one to the heart, and one to the main artery in the thigh. I’ll know more when they bring him to the lab. Whoever did this really did a number on him.”

“What kind of number?” Cal asked. “How many wounds are we talking about here?”

"Twelve, that I can find," she said. "There may be more. He's a real mess. Strong bastard, whoever it was who did this."

"Twelve wounds?" Cal swallowed in surprise. "Shit. Someone was really pissed off. What about the weapon?"

"Big blade. Curved. Like a sickle, only smaller. Never seen anything like it before. Really shredded him up. Shouldn't be hard to match if you can find it."

"I take it's not lying next to him." The ME shrugged and shook her head. "Time of death?"

"I'd put it between eleven and one, but I can't say that for sure until I get him to the morgue."

Cal nodded. "Thanks."

"No sweat. I'll get you my full report as soon as I got it. You want to survey the scene before I cart him off?"

"Is it bad?"

The ME nodded, almost nonchalantly. Nothing bothered her. "A few of the newer guys lost their breakfast. Over there," she said, pointing, "just so you don't step in it."

Cal felt his mouth go dry. First day back on the job after leaving the clinic three weeks early and now this. "Thanks," he said. "Just gimme a minute, okay?"

"No problem." The ME saw the sheriff waving her over and started towards him. "Cal?" she said, turning around to look him in the eye. "It's good to have you back."

"Thanks," Cal mumbled. He heard the sound of crunching grass as the ME walked off behind him.

Cal took a minute to survey the scene. The car, a shiny black sedan, was parked against a tree, half-observed by some thick green bushes. He checked the ground. No skid marks, no tracks at all. It had been dry for days, so no footprints, no soft ground, nothing to work from. He looked around some more. The ME was talking to Dan. A few cops were busy keeping the media out of the way and off to one side. Only a few of the local reporters had made it, but Cal knew the Harrisburg television crews wouldn't be far off. A group of tech guys, some local, some from the state police, dusted the car for prints, while a few others surveyed the ground around it for anything out of the ordinary. From his angle, Cal couldn't see into the car, but he could catch a glimpse of the canvas being used to cover up the

victim. And there, inspecting the opposite side of the car, was Ramirez.

Cal called one of the tech guys over, a short, bald-headed man named Dixon. “What have you got?” he asked. Cal could feel butterflies pounding in his stomach. He was glad he’d skipped breakfast that morning. This way there was nothing to puke up. Still, he knew the best way to calm down was to stick to the routine. He’d get back into the swing of things soon. He hoped.

The technician paused for a moment and scratched his bald head. “Preliminarily speaking, we’ve got nothing. No footmarks. A few interesting soil samples maybe. They don’t look right for this area. A few blood spatters here—” he pointed only a few feet away from where the two men stood talking “—indicates that the Bishop was probably attacked here, in his car, and then the perp moved him over there to hide him. It’s a pretty effective cover, at least at night. Some morning commuters saw the car. One of them got curious and checked it out. She’s the one who called it in.”

“That’s just what you need to see first thing on a Tuesday morning. Right?” Cal weakly joked. Dixon only stared at Cal, ignoring his lame attempt at humor. Cal sighed. “How long before you guys are done?”

Dixon shrugged. “Less than an hour. We’re doing a larger perimeter search now, but I doubt we’ll find something.”

“Keep me posted.” With a nod the smaller man walked off.

Cal took two steps towards the car and froze. It was shit like this that got him drinking so much in the first place. *Not just this shit...* he thought as he ordered his feet to move towards the car. *It’s okay. You’ve seen all this before. Just keep walking.*

Cal finally halted about five feet from the driver’s side door. He closed his eyes and bent down. He could already smell the rusty, acrid scent of spilled blood. Cal forced his eyes open. He could see the man-shaped form under the canvas. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a glove. He had seen this type of thing before. *It’ll be okay. Just pull back the canvas. It’s nothing you haven’t seen before.*

Cal was wrong.

Holes. Cal’s first impression as he saw the body was holes—gaping, mawing holes that covered the chest, belly, and neck. The knife had been twisted in the victim, turned this way and that in a violent and gruesome manner. Strong bastard indeed. A thin sheet of

blood covered everything—the victim, the entire front seat, the windshield and steering wheel. Cal put one hand to his mouth. He could feel the bile rising in him. He fought it. *Down, down.* He put the canvas back.

Stepping away from the car, he inhaled deeply, one breath, two, great gasps of the warm morning air. “Jesus Christ,” he mumbled. “Show some respect,” a voice said behind him. Ramirez.

Cal turned and saw Ramirez facing him. He glared at Cal, clearly unhappy that his senior detective had been called onto the scene. “He was a man of the cloth, after all. One should show respect by not taking the Lord’s name in vain in front of him.”

“Save it for Sunday school, Ramirez,” Cal said. He could feel his disgust at seeing the body being replaced by aggravation. And some fun—needling Ramirez was always good sport. “This is not a catechism.”

“No; no, this is a tragedy,” Ramirez said gravely.

“All death is a tragedy, Ramirez; this one is no different than the rest.” Ramirez opened his mouth to protest, but Cal raised his hand for silence. “Tell me what you see.”

This was their standard method of teaching. Cal would ask Ramirez for his opinion of the scene, and then tell him why he was wrong. Ramirez hated it. Cal did not.

Ramirez sighed. “No obvious sign indicating the Bishop was forced off the road. He must have known his attackers. Except...”

“Except what?”

“Here.” Ramirez walked around to the front of the car. Cal followed. He saw a large dent in the front of the hood. “It seems like the Bishop hit something,” Ramirez added.

Cal snorted. “That’s obvious. What did the tech say?”

“No paint marks or any sign that he hit another car. No, they figure a large animal of some kind, like a deer, except there’s no blood, no hairs, and no body. And the dent seems wrong for a deer. More likely the animal was bipedal—that’s walking on two legs.”

“I know what it means—I went to college, same as you.”

“Sorry. Anyway, could have been a bear. Could be he didn’t hurt the animal that badly. He could have hit it and it wandered off.”

“Hardly wounded, and a dent that size? I doubt it.” Cal also doubted that a bear had made that dent.

Ramirez shrugged. "Could be some object put in the middle of the road to slow the Bishop down, or stop him altogether. No evidence supporting that, though it could be the case."

"That's a lot of 'could be's', even for you, Ramirez."

Ramirez kept talking. "Of course, we don't know when or where the dent was made. *Could be* it happened earlier," he said, emphasizing the "could be" with a particular sneer. "Could have been months ago for all we know."

Cal considered this idea. "Could be, though I somehow doubt the diocese of Harrisburg wants their top man driving around in a beat-up Lexus."

Ramirez shrugged. "They do take a vow of poverty, after all."

Cal changed the subject. "How'd the car get here?"

Ramirez surveyed the ground. "No skid marks—it wasn't an accident that he ended up there. He either drove it in there himself, or..." He left that sentence unfinished, since he couldn't think of what else may have happened. He continued. "Of course, the million dollar question is why? What was the Bishop doing here, on this road, in the first place?"

Cal turned to Ramirez. "Start at the very beginning, Detective. The first question really is, why was the Bishop in Chambersburg at all?"

Ramirez checked his notebook. "Visiting his sister. One Loretta Fayne. She and her husband have a house over in that new development—Canterbury Trails. Up by the college. Went there to spend Memorial Day with them and their kids. The diocese confirmed all this. According to them, he was supposed to be back by nine."

"Nine?" Cal furrowed his brow. "The ME says he died no sooner than eleven. What time did he leave the sister's?"

Ramirez shook his head. "We're trying to track her down now."

Cal sighed. "Wait a minute—did you say Canterbury Trails? You leave there, take a right, connect up to route 997 and you got a straight shot to the interstate. Why'd he take this road?"

Ramirez shrugged. "Pretty desolate spot. No businesses, no bars letting their customers out at two. Closest house is a farm house about two miles that way—" Ramirez pointed east "—and that's so far off the road you can't really see it anyway. Certainly they didn't see anything interesting. We already checked."

Cal surveyed the scene again. “So our Bishop got off the main drive, took this lonely stretch of road, and ended up getting twelve stab wounds for his trouble. The question is why? Did you see the body?” he added, suddenly rounding on Ramirez.

Ramirez looked a little green under the gills at the thought of the body. “Yeah,” he said.

“What’d you think?”

Ramirez considered carefully. “Some religious wacko? Set a trap for the Bishop? Upset about—who knows? The molestation crap?”

“Well, this is one priest who won’t be bothering any little kids any time soon.”

“Jesus, Cal,” Ramirez said in disgust.

“But you’re wrong about one thing,” Cal added. “This wasn’t some wacko hacking away at the good Bishop for some Catholic revenge. Look at the body, Ramirez. This was personal.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning the Bishop knew his attacker. He came here to meet someone. Probably for sex—a girlfriend, a boyfriend. Drug dealer? That many knife wounds means only one thing—someone was really pissed off at the Bishop. And you don’t get that mad at someone you don’t know.”

Ramirez eyed Cal. The tension that had been simmering between them seemed ready to explode. “Why’d you come back?” he suddenly said. “We don’t need you.”

“Your boss seems to feel differently,” Cal said evenly.

“Yeah, well, after the crap you pulled, he shouldn’t even be your boss anymore.”

Cal fought the urge to sock Ramirez right in the mouth. “That’s over now, Ramirez.”

“Is it?” Ramirez got his face right into Cal’s. Their eyes locked. “It’s because of you that guy got off. Got off and got to go home to his lovely wife, whom he then proceeded to pound into a fucking coma. She lost her spleen, she lost her fucking *micha*, man. They had to cut it out of her. Now she can’t even have any kids, ever. It was lucky she woke up at all. And why did he get away? Cause you didn’t show up for a court date.”

“Shut up, Ramirez,” Cal muttered. He wanted to cover his ears, to block out Ramirez’s words, but it didn’t matter; he’d said the same thing to himself a hundred times already.

“And why didn’t you show up? I’ll tell you why. You were wasted. You missed a ten A.M. court date because you were too busy getting your fix.”

Cal could feel himself getting angrier and angrier. “That’s in the past, Ramirez. I went to rehab. I’m clean now.”

“Once a drunk, always a drunk, that’s what I say.” Cal grabbed Ramirez by the collar and cocked his fist back. Ramirez hesitated for a second, then gave him a small grin. “Do it,” he said. “Don’t worry, we can blame it on the booze.”

Cal seethed, but he slowly let go of Ramirez’s lapels. The other cop straightened them out with a quick snap. “We’re partners now,” Cal said. “Whether you like it or not. I know I don’t. But I’m still your superior officer. Remember that.”

“Yes, ‘sir,’” Ramirez said sarcastically. “But just remember, ‘partner,’ I’ve got my eye on you.”

*That’s it,* Cal thought. None of this was worth it. One quick shot to the gut and another quick uppercut would teach Ramirez a little respect. But before Cal could act, a shout from one of the techs drew both their attentions.

“Detectives!” The tech was shouting and waving at them about a hundred yards down the road. “Come here!”

Cal and Ramirez hotfooted it down the road. As they approached they could see something in the grass. It was a series of lines and figures, triangles, circles, and slashes. It might have been a message, written in some language that Cal did not recognize. But he did recognize what the message was written in.

It was written in the Bishop’s blood.

“Jesus,” Ramirez said. Cal was tempted to make a smart remark, but he felt so unnerved by the sight he let it pass. Ramirez turned to Cal. “Now what?”

Cal turned away from the blood writing. “It’s personal, remember? We talk to the people who knew him.”

**LORETTA** Fayne was five years younger than her brother. Graceful and tall, her high-cheeked ebony features belied only the smallest hint of her foreign birth. Her beautiful dark eyes, red from crying, would not meet the detectives’ gaze as she asked them to sit.

“Ma’am, first of all, we’d like to say how sorry we are for your loss,” Ramirez began. Cal had to hand it to the little putz. He did have a knack for talking to the victim’s families. “We know this is a trying time for you, but please understand, we have to ask you some questions.”

Mrs. Fayne nodded softly. She was a science teacher, and had the graceful bearing of a natural educator. “I do not know what I can tell you,” she said quietly, “but I will do anything I can to help.”

“Your brother was visiting you yesterday, correct?” She nodded. “What time did he leave?”

“Eleven. I remember the news had just started.”

“The diocese said he planned to be back there by nine.”

Mrs. Fayne smiled faintly. “He was late getting off, Detective. We spent the whole day together. The kids had Memorial Day off from school. My brother was very good at keeping a schedule, but he decided just this once to stay late. He didn’t think it would cause any harm.” At the thought of this she looked ready to cry. “Who would do something like this?” she asked piteously.

Ramirez coughed. “That’s what we’re trying to find out, ma’am. How was your brother yesterday? Was he nervous, anxious about something? Did he act unusually at all?”

Mrs. Fayne shook her head vigorously. “No, no, he was quite himself, Detective. He had a wonderful time playing with the children. We all stayed up late because of it. It was a lovely day.”

“He didn’t mention any plans about meeting someone, either here or in Harrisburg?”

“Oh, no. He didn’t know anyone else here, not really. And who would he meet in Harrisburg at such a late hour?”

“Mrs. Fayne, we found some damage to his car. Was it damaged when he left here?”

“Oh, no, Detective, it was fine.”

“Are you sure? The damage was on the front...a dent in the hood...”

“No, no, I’m sure it was okay.”

The time had come to ask the more difficult questions, but Ramirez was hesitating. Cal could sense his reticence. He became ready to take over the interrogation. “Mrs. Fayne,” Ramirez continued carefully. “You must understand, at a time like this, with such a brutal crime, we look first to the associates of the deceased, to the people

he knew. You understand?” Mrs. Fayne nodded. “Then, to your knowledge, did your brother have unsavory associations that might give us a place to begin our search for suspects?”

Mrs. Fayne looked confused. “I—I don’t understand.”

“Did your brother have a girlfriend, a boyfriend?” Cal blurted out.

“Detective!” Mrs. Fayne said shocked, turning her full gaze onto Cal for the first time.

“Did he have anything to do with this child abuse stuff we’ve been hearing about? Of course, it could be something different. Drug problems...gambling debts?”

“Detective!” Mrs. Fayne said again, with a little more force. “I resent your implication. My brother was a respectable man. He was kind, and decent, and...he was a fine man and a fine member of the cloth. How dare you accuse him of...of...” she faltered, remembering Cal’s line of questioning.

“Mrs. Fayne, I understand this is difficult for you. But if you hide something from us it will only help those who killed your brother. We need to know the truth.”

Mrs. Fayne stood firmly and walked to her door. She opened it resolutely and pointed to her sidewalk. “My brother was a good man,” she said with fire in her voice. “That *is* the truth, whether you choose to believe me or not. Are we done here?”

“Mrs. Fayne—”

“Are we done here?” It was not meant as a question.

Once the door had closed behind them, Ramirez rounded on Cal. “It’s nice to see that sobering up hasn’t made you any less of an asshole,” he said.

“Fuck you, Ramirez,” Cal replied as they walked towards the car. “You’ll never be a good detective if you can’t ask the tough questions.”

Ramirez paused before the passenger side door. “And did you get any useful answers?” he asked before getting in the car.

**THE** two spent the day canvassing the neighborhoods the Bishop may have passed en route to getting killed. No one had seen a thing. Several phone leads about suspicious cars lead nowhere. Detectives

in Harrisburg questioned all of the Bishop's colleagues. Everyone said the same thing about him: the man was a prince.

"We must be missing something," Ramirez said. The two were back at the station house. It was getting late.

"And what's that, exactly?" Cal replied.

"I don't know," Ramirez said, more than a little irritated. "We've come up with nothing, so we must be missing something."

Cal snorted. "You sound like a bad cop movie, Ramirez. We've come up with nothing because so far there's been nothing to find."

"So what are you saying? That we're not going to solve this one?"

"Boy, you give up easy, don't you? I'm not saying that at all. You just expect, though, that this is like those mysteries you read about in books, that the solution has already been neatly laid out and we just have to arrange all the clues in the right order. Well, this isn't a detective book and we're not the Hardy boys. This is real life. And in real life, cop work takes time. It takes patience. We're still waiting for the lab results. We've still got witnesses to talk to."

"Like who?"

"Like the Bishop's associates. The people up in Harrisburg. The sister hardly ever saw him. She isn't going to know what he's really up to."

"You still think that's the angle it could be? Some dark secret in the Bishop's life?"

Cal shrugged. "That's what it usually is."

Ramirez shook his head. "I don't think so. Besides, the Harrisburg PD already interviewed those suspects. They all said the same thing."

"Rule number one of good cop work, Ramirez. Never let someone else do your job. Tomorrow morning I'm headed up to Harrisburg myself to interview those suspects."

"And what am I supposed to do?"

"You're coming with me, bright boy. Take some notes. You might even learn something."

"And if that's a bust?"

"If that's a bust, then we'll deal with it. Rome wasn't built in a day."

Ramirez looked uneasy. "I think you're wrong. I think there's more to this than meets the eye."

Cal shrugged. "Maybe there is. Maybe the lab techs will come up with something good. Should have a report by tomorrow afternoon."

“What about this?” Ramirez asked. He passed over to Cal a black and white snapshot of the strange markings they found at the scene of the crime. Cal shivered when he saw them, remembering the red stain that had seeped into the ground. He inhaled sharply.

“That,” he said, “is a problem. Could be something; could be nothing.”

“It’s not nothing, Cal.”

Silently, Cal agreed. Still, he thought, his version of events seemed most likely. “Look, Ramirez, I thought we agreed on this. For whatever reason, the Bishop pulls off the side of the road to meet up with someone. The meeting goes bad. Our perp pulls out the knife and does a number on the good Bishop. End of story.”

“But the writing? The blood?”

Cal looked at the strange marks again. “Go home,” he said.

“What?”

“Go home. Go home, Ramirez, go home to your family. Get some sleep. See you first thing in the morning.”

“Cal—”

“Go.” Ramirez finally nodded. He stood up and slowly walked out of the station house, a little angry, and more than a little worried.

So was Cal.

**BROTHER** Rich Brantridge longingly waved good-bye to the last of his prayer group as they headed off to their cars. With a soft smile he locked the meeting hall doors behind him. It had been a good prayer meeting. There had been a large turnout. That was no surprise, considering the horror of that morning. Tragedy always brought faith to people. Why, after the terrorist attacks on New York, the hall had been filled for months. At moments like this, everyone turned to God.

The genial man ambled back towards the center of the hall, picking up a stray Bible on his way. It had been a good group. Prayer meetings always left Brother Brantridge feeling warm, feeling hopeful. Even in a time of crisis. Everyone came together, as a community, to seek counsel, to speak to the Lord. A society of friends, yes, the name did say it all. There was always such an outpouring of heart-filled expression, love for their fellow man...well, except, of course,

for Mrs. Oglander. Mrs. Oglander and her incessant need for prayers. Mrs. Oglander was too busy asking everyone to pray for her to take out time to pray for somebody else. Pray for her glaucoma. Pray that her grand-niece passes her driver's exam. Pray that Mrs. Oglander passes gas! Brother Brantridge chuckled at that last thought. She was an old biddy, always the first to arrive and the last to go, though she never helped to set up or put any thing away. A harmless old woman, but always demanding to be the center of attention.

It was a dark night, and the stillness of the hall grew as Brother Brantridge shut off the lights. The only light that streamed in was the dim glow off a small corner streetlamp. The pastor winced as he leaned down to pick up one last Bible. His back was sore again. Course he probably needed to lose some weight to help with that, but that was difficult to do. Not with Mrs. Nielson's shoo-fly pie and Mrs. Murray's walnut fudge brownies. Next week, he would try to stick to one dessert.

A sharp noise from outside suddenly caught the pastor's attention. It sounded like—like a gasp, a startled sound. Brother Brantridge paused. He heard only silence. He began to walk towards the entrance to his small living quarters on one side of the hall.

*Bam bam bam*

The sudden and urgent pounding on the door sent a shock through the Quaker leader's system. He held his breath for a minute, and then smiled. Likely someone forgot something. It was just—the suddenness, the violence of the knock that startled him.

He shuffled back to the door. *Bam! Bam! Bam!* "Coming!" he called. "Who is it?" There was no response. Turning the key slowly, Brother Brantridge cautiously peered out the door. "Why, Mrs. Oglander!" he said, opening the door wider. "Did you forget something?"

Mrs. Oglander made no movement, or no sound, save for a small, raspy gasp. "Mrs. Oglander...are you alright?" With a sudden pitch the woman fell forward into the prayer leader's arms. She was a large woman, and Brother Brantridge could barely hold her. He saw, on her neck, two deep puncture wounds. Blood trickled swiftly from them, staining her flower-covered blouse. "What in God's name?" It was only then that he noticed them.

Men—a group, three, four...maybe eight or more. They were dressed all in black, in deep robes that hid their faces, their arms and

flesh...everything except their right hand. Brother Brantridge could see the cold gray flesh of their right hands, mainly because he could also see their knives—sharp, curved blades pointed right at him.

Brother Brantridge dropped Mrs. Oglander. She slumped dead to the floor. He took a step back, two, but suddenly they were upon him, swarming over him as if locusts. “Oh, God,” he said, a whisper. Two of them grabbed him, a wrist in each right hand. They pinned him to the ground. He struggled as furiously as he could. Their grip was cold iron, but he managed to wrest one hand free. He grabbed for his attacker, clutching onto the sleeve of the left arm of his assailant. Only...only it wasn't an arm he felt in there. Not a human arm. It was strong, and coiled, and undulating, not like an arm, not a human arm anyway...

Before the prayer leader could finish his thought they were all upon him, pinning him down while one of them plunged his knife into the pastor's chest, again and again, the grinding sound of bone and metal echoing throughout the prayer hall. With a loud and final gasp Brother Brantridge died when they plunged the knife directly into his heart, his eyes wide open, his face desperately turning towards a picture of his Lord and savior.

He died as he turned towards God.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**MICHAEL G. CORNELIUS** is the author of the award-winning novel *Creating Man* (Vineyard Press, 2001: Finalist, Lambda Literary Prize, Nominee, Independent Press Award and American Library Association Award,) and is co-author of the popular *Susan Slutt, Girl Sleuth* detective parody series. He has also published short fiction in numerous journals, magazines, and anthologies, including *Velvet Mafia*, *The Egg Box*, *Futures Mystery Anthology Magazine*, *The Spillway Review*, and *Encore*, as well as in anthologies from Alyson Press, StarPress Books, and others. Currently chair of the Department of English and Mass Communications at Wilson College in Chambersburg, PA, Michael received his Ph.D. from the University of Rhode Island.

Michael is also a Pennsylvania state Humanities Council scholar in the field of Horror Cinema, and in his spare time, Michael enjoys reading, golf, football, tennis, and anything to do with the BBC-America television show “Bargain Hunt.”

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