

# $\mathbf{BY}$

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Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire. --Jude 7

# Chapter One

"Are you listening?"

A moment to clear away the cobwebs of sleep had William grasping for a sense of time. He had nodded off for only a minute after sitting idle in the confessional for most of an hour. Notepaper slid from under his Bible's burgundy cover, so he tucked it back under the flap. He curled his hands around the worn leather to hold the venerable book on his knees.

"Where were we?"

As if lips pressed against his ear, the smoky voice spoke with chilling intimacy, "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned."

Like a rush of passing fire, the familiar timbre broke a sweat from the back of William's neck. Acid vented into his throat, and he swallowed a stew of bitter fumes.

"Don't." His weak command was more a plea.

"You're an agent of mercy, Father. You must listen to my confession. I begin with Lorraine, who despaired of her wretched life such that she set her condominium ablaze, destroying her soul and murdering her infant son. Her heart failed her when I whispered of her husband's promiscuous lusts."

William clenched his jaw, bracing himself as the gleeful demon forced its litany of horror on him. The ruined lives were unknown to him, so he knew he was not the demon's only project. As sweat beaded on his scalp and trickled into his gray eyebrows, William closed his eyes and tried to keep his stomach calm.

"I don't care."

"Of course you care, Father. You care that Detective Rhodes succumbed to the depraved heat flaming in his veins and despoiled his precocious nephew of his heroworship in the boy's own bedroom. You care that the incestuous commerce I revealed in nightmares to the Schulte daughter has left her virtue shipwrecked. She won't visit her father, who will die alone in his apartment, cursing God, like your father, like you."

William's fingers tightened around his Bible. At forty-three, the pale skin of his thick hands still bore the scars of abuse. "I'm nothing like my father."

The voice erupted with fiery laughter. "No, you're much better. You're a good man, unyielding to the scandal I spread."

"Shut up." The demon's ridicule forced William's thoughts back to when he was fifteen and standing in humiliation before his father. He remembered the delight of classmates watching his father's upbraiding. He remembered his father's derisive voice and the white teeth—a grimace for a smile. That was his father.

"You're an alchemist, dear William, transforming crime into justice, hate into love. You should be honored, adored. You're a hero, a god, dear William, a god who has saved so many innocents from suffering."

William shook his head as if he could free himself from the demon's saddle of lies, but his will remained bridled. The darkly exciting voice had stirred his blood, so he recited a short prayer of contrition and fled the confessional. He nearly ran into the janitor, Robeson, who hobbled along with one short leg, and offered to help William as he dashed past.

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Hunger was the landscape of William's life, an eternally barren terrain through which he had roamed for over two decades. From tropical jungles to arctic peaks, he had accepted the paradox of his life with a contrite heart, but now was one of those times when practiced will and diligent prayer had failed, and he must eat. Weak from too many meatless nights, his sinews twitched as if coming unstrung, yet surging with anticipation, his relentless legs pounded the muddy ground, driving him on.

At the end of a trail of mud and rain and despair, he found a headless rabbit that had been ravaged by one of the innumerable eagles thriving in the archipelago. He devoured the carcass, gulping down flesh and grinding bone. He was capable of finding his own meal, but he was content with the leavings of a lesser creature. Pride had no place in an animal, after all. Pride was only human, and in the late hours of a mild Alaskan night, William was not human.

He finished off the edible parts, leaving ribbons of wet fur strewn across the sloppy trail. The cool rain hit him in fat drops, splattering on his gray muzzle to become tiny puddles that knitted his bristled eyelashes together. When he blinked, the puddles streaked his jowls like tears. He had spent years in tropical escapes, but now he was home in the Alexander Archipelago, where lush rainforests climbed coastal hills in carpets of cedar and hemlock, and occasional snowfalls reminded Ketchikan it was part of Alaska.

The outer islands of the archipelago formed one of the least-explored rainforests on earth, accessible only by private vessels. As a boy, William had spent time envying

travelers at the dock or exploring up Deer Mountain past the fish hatchery. A quarter of a century later, he traveled easier and farther, his lupine form gliding through currents of spruce like a salmon through the sea.

When he heard clacking footsteps, he rotated his ears and sniffed the air. His keen senses triangulated on the meat climbing a rocky outcropping across the fjord. Through the dimly sunlit haze, a night in late summer, William saw a mountain goat picking its way along a ridge. It was too good to be true, a temptation to test a reticent virtue.

More would be good. More was always good. Saliva flowed into his mouth. He stepped from the shadows, breaking from a curtain of trees into a muskeg heaping with sphagnum moss. The swampy terrain was difficult to navigate and gave him time to regain control. His was a discipline of long practice, a belief that a disordered appetite only grows as it is fed, that self-mastery is the only means to freedom. Nevertheless, he could not force his eyes away. From across the narrow fjord, he watched the meat vanish around the hill as saliva spilled from his jowls.

"You deserve fresh meat." The smoky voice spoke sly suggestions, usually goading William when he had no words to answer. Sometimes the voice hovered about his shoulders. This time it seemed to be inside his head, and an acid reflux accompanied its demonic presence. "Your belly full, no more aching emptiness. You can't help what you are. It's the law of nature."

As had happened every night for twenty-two years, sleep had stolen his humanity, leaving William in possession of a wolf's body or a wolf in possession of his soul. Despite the loss of his body, his mind was his own. He knew there was only one law, and it did not belong to nature.

He stepped through the swampy ground onto the steep bank before galloping down to the sea. He followed the rocky shoreline to an old house, small like a miner's shack, with a brightly painted second story heaped on top. The slatted structure looked like a stack of child's blocks sitting on the foggy bank.

He slowed to a stop near a lighted window. Joe Freeman was a commercial fisherman living with his wife and three children. William assumed Joe was sleeping, since he heard no plaintive shouts as he had on many other nights. Sweet Wendy, mother of three, repository of family tales, baker of sweet cakes, and weekday Mass-goer, was not crying. Cast in silhouette, she sat in a rocking chair, the shadow of a book propped on her lap.

"You can save her. You're God's soldier." Like an obscenity muttered in polite company, the lie gathered silence. When his dry mouth filled with juices of anticipation,

he took a clarifying breath. As his acidic stomach began to ache with emptiness, William snarled, dismayed by his susceptibility to the intoxicating voice, disheartened that his world remained defined by ceaseless need, a plague hopeless of salvation. The demon he once thought an angel had offered to liberate him, and he had made that Faustian pact only to wonder, now, how he could ever have believed that surrendering to his impulses would make him free.

"He beat her tonight. He's sleeping just through the far window." The voice hissed like steam. "Suffering is evil. Stop her suffering."

William's piercing blue eyes twitched as they examined the window. Delicious human meat was a distant memory, an attraction not diminished by years of deprivation. He observed the lighted window, considered the darkened one, and then turned and ran into the night.

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On Monday afternoon, Catherine Howard was standing outside William's office door gnawing on her thumbnail. As she stood slouching, thumb in her mouth, she appeared not only small, but also childlike. She did not look like the seductive woman old Harry had described. She looked harmless.

When William smiled, genial wrinkles curled over his cheekbones and warmed his cool gaze. He was a robust blonde, whose old-fashioned crew cut grew white rather than gray, and a ruddy bald spot had captured his once bushy crown. As he reached his hand out to Catherine, William noticed that her sore-looking cuticles were torn in places. She slipped both of her small hands around his and squeezed.

She wore glasses, an immodest tweed skirt, and a silk shell with a jacket. Her shoes were expensive leather pumps, impractical in one of the wettest climates on Earth. He recognized the soft Italian leather and appreciated the elegant curve of the insole; it was the sort of shoe women in fetish films wore.

Harry had warned William that Catherine was a dangerous woman, but Harry was a retiring priest entrenched in the pre-Vatican II world of veiled women and Latin masses. He had antiquated expectations of women that, by the twenty-first century, were not so charming. In particular, he did not approve of professional women, and Catherine worked at the state-funded Portman Center as a therapist.

"I'm glad to meet you, Father," said Catherine as she looked William over. Her thoughtful brown eyes studied him through oval lenses. When a smile spread across her freckled cheeks, she dropped his hand and stepped back. "I wondered about the name, but I thought you were in Asia. Billy, it's me, Sulli."

He squinted at her as if he was trying to unravel a knot, and then recognition forced a smile to his face. "Well look at you." Although his smile strained his cheeks, his chest felt suddenly heavy. He wished he could say that he had not thought of Catherine Sullivan in years, but he thought of her almost every day. "Sulli," he muttered reverently. "My God, look at you."

"A priest." A smile twisted one corner of her mouth. "You?"

With a shrug, he spread his hands in the air and confirmed, "A priest." He opened his office door and escorted her to a chair. After he sat down at his desk, they continued to stare at each other in silence.

Of all the emotions William imagined upon seeing Catherine again, he did not expect the affection that transformed him with gentle magic. Despite his effort to the contrary, he had often relived those feverish nights with Catherine in the back of his Ford. He recalled sharing every drama engendered by adolescent desire, but he had never shared simple affection.

Eager just to hear her voice, he told himself his pounding heart was the result of familiarity, nothing more. He told himself she was not the wild girl he had known and, of course, he was far from that tormented boy. He tried to ease the passion from his eyes, leave them merely kind. "So many years," he said. "I know from the file Harry gave me that you're married."

"Not much longer."

"You're a therapist?"

She waved her hand to keep him from asking more questions and said, "Graduation, college, marriage. Boring. Now you. A priest? How did that happen?"

William leaned back, his eyes darting to the ground. He crossed his arms over his chest. "Let's see...graduation, dissolute life, seminary."

"Dissolute?"

He reached to a stack of papers on his desk, casually straightening them as he explained, "Thailand first. I planned to live in the jungle or some crazy thing like that." He sat back, crossed his arms over his chest, and offered a sheepish smile. "The misadventures—oh, let me not dwell on those."

Catherine laughed. "Please do. I haven't been anywhere since college."

At the mention of college, William dropped his smile. "The jungle's simple, really. You just have to remember if a monkey eats a plant, you eat the plant. If the monkey doesn't eat it, you don't eat it. And when you can, you eat the monkey."

"Real survival stuff. The biggest adventure I had was breaking two hundred bowling when I was twenty-three. No, wait, there was Max's big idea to put us in the record books by making the world's largest pancake."

"Max!" exclaimed William as he rocked back in his chair.

"He owns a diner on Stedman, 'Max Stacks'."

They laughed and watched each other.

Despite the shallow wrinkles of age, her mouth had the same petulant curve William relished sucking on at eighteen. Her skin was soft white, as if smoothed with baby powder. Pale freckles lent her the youthful appeal of a scrappy girl, like the fifth-grader who consoled him after he had received yet another day of detention.

He found it hard to breathe, and equally hard to look into her eyes. Her languid gaze was a powerful seduction, an enchanting dogma to which he still felt a compulsion to surrender. Every taste of her had always left him hungry for more. He moistened his lips and tried to cover his struggle with a stretch. The painful paradox of his life became acute as Catherine began to reminisce about old friends.

"I'm sorry," he interrupted, "but I have another appointment at three. We'll have to catch up sometime soon. Right now, I want to see what I can do for you."

"Of course." Her halting words suggested reluctance. "It's just going to take awhile to get used to this. I mean if you had told me twenty-five years ago that Billy Osbourne would be the pastor of Our Lady, I would have bet my life you were wrong. Father Harry thought I should continue these sessions, not that there's much more to be said. This was supposed to be counseling with my husband, too, but as you can see, he isn't here." She gestured at the chair beside her.

William leaned back, hands steepled on his stomach. "Why don't you give me the nickel tour?"

As Catherine sat cupping her hands on her bare knees, she summarized her failed marriage, finishing with, "John promised to go to counseling, and I told him he had a year or I would divorce him. Next week is a year. If I put off leaving, he won't see that as an effort to compromise. He'll see that as affirmation that I never mean what I say, and he wins."

"You don't want him to win?"

Catherine's face tightened with a scowl. "He can think I need him like I need air and will die without him, for all I care. The only worry I have is how hard he'll fight the settlement. I don't want much, just enough to start new, but I'm sure he'll get nasty.

Things are what matter most to him, but his real problem is he thinks that's what matters to all of us."

"And what matters to you, Sulli?"

She took a breath. "What matters is not holding tight to every feeling, as if an unguarded smile might give you away. Living, you know? Really living. I'm tired of feeling empty."

"I take it John's not demonstrative?"

"Flat-line." Her hand sliced the air. "We're roommates who have sex." She paused with discomfort until William offered her a careless eyebrow. "The most exciting moment of our marriage was a fight when he pulled a spatula out of my hands to keep me from breaking it on the stove, and I thought he would hit me with it. Do you know how much I wanted him to? Just one moment of passion, oh, but John's never even raised his voice. I used to think he was insecure, that if I made him feel safe, he would share his feelings." She rubbed her temples. "I've come to realize he has none."

"It's hard when someone fails to meet our expectations."

She stopped rubbing her head. "Is that what you think, that I had unreasonable expectations?"

"Not unreasonable." He knew what she was thinking: they had once talked about marriage. He had even bought a ring, but then she slept with Thom. "Are there any children?"

"John says I'm barren, like he'd know."

Before he thought better of his question, William asked, "Has there been infidelity?"

Catherine glanced away, began to speak, and then stopped herself. She bit her lip and stared at him from under her long black eyelashes. "I haven't confessed it yet."

"You?" A disturbing mixture of disappointment and arousal ignited his curiosity.

She had been wringing her hands, but now she began picking at her thumbnail's torn cuticle. "And I didn't love her."

"Her?" An exquisite ache rushed through his body with the rhythm of his heart. He could feel the demon hovering about his shoulders, a phantom of desire cloaking him in the velvet darkness of confusion. It offered a lie for every ideal. The love he remembered was becoming only lust, or maybe the lie was that it had ever been love.

"I didn't hide it from John," explained Catherine defensively. "He knew about them. Once, he even said he didn't care who I had sex with as long as I had sex with him, too."

William's thoughts were swirling with disbelief. He wondered how much of the wild girl had been destroyed by John. She was a mature woman now, her eyes shadowed with worry, her hair color no longer natural, nor strewn about with playful curls. But her deep brown eyes were still captivating.

"You feel yourself attracted to women?" he asked, his throat tight.

"I feel myself liberated by women. I remember when John asked me to marry him, I thought, what the hell? One man was pretty much like any other." She stopped and looked away. "I didn't mean you, Billy--Father. Do I really have to call you 'Father'?"

When he shrugged, he realized it was a mistake. His vocational boundary began to dissolve like sand beneath the warm tide of old intimacy, and he wondered what had made him think coming home was a good idea. "Was John unfaithful?"

She laughed with disdain. "Nothing so emotionally messy. He even tried to congratulate himself, reminding me that he never beat me. That was all he had. He never beat me. He thinks that makes him a good husband. I didn't tell Father Harry about the women. He wouldn't have let me off so easy." When William's eyebrows arched with interest, Catherine sighed. "You're not going to either, are you?"

He sat back and steepled his fingers again, his elbows resting on his chair's arms. "The Church has a very clear instruction about that."

"What about you, Billy? You were never one for rules."

William shifted with discomfort. "I know you, Sulli. You'll spend all your time trying to prove me wrong, whatever I say, and I don't want to encourage that."

"You sound positively patronizing."

"But have I gotten away with it?" William winked. "Age seems to be making my authoritative style a little more palatable. At least I don't get slapped as often." After a pause, he reasserted his self-discipline. "Look, we all make bad choices, but the only unforgivable one is to live as if we're beyond God's mercy."

Catherine examined him, her gaze lingering with tardy distraction on his collar. "That must have been some few years in the jungle."

"It sounds like you've been living in one, too."

"More like a desert. You know, it's not just about sex."

"More often it's about using people to feel better about ourselves." William's deep voice lilted as he tried to make his point and yet remain kind. "What was liberating? You realized you had value? You felt in control? Wasn't it all about you?"

"I'm still finding myself." She laughed as if what she said were ironic. "Self-actualization takes time."

"Self-actualization," echoed William, one eyebrow rising in disapproval. "I'm afraid you won't find me too sympathetic. Here, we're concerned with self-transcendence. You don't belong to yourself, Sulli; you belong to God. I suggest you cultivate friendships and prayer, rather than recreational sex."

"Why is it always about sex with you priests?"

"This is about temperance and responsibility."

Her natural humor returned. "Who the hell are you and what have you done with Billy?" They shared a laugh before Catherine asked, "When did you ever care about anything the Church had to say?"

"About twenty-two years ago."

"What happened then?"

"I found out it's all true."

"Billy Osbourne, a priest. Who would have imagined? You tossed rocks at these very windows. You took my church bulletin so you could make your mother think you were actually at Mass. And all those pranks..." She stopped herself, eyes suddenly glistening with emotion.

William acknowledged Catherine's nostalgia with a regretful smile.

"What could possibly have changed you?" she muttered. "You must have gotten an invitation from God himself."

"Something like that."

# Chapter Two

As Catherine prepared for bed, she stopped by the den and kissed the bald spot on the top of John's head. Without a word, he rose and followed her, leaving the computer and lights on. When he caught up and took her hand, he asked about sex.

"I'm tired," she said. "Can we just cuddle and go to sleep?"

John dropped her hand as if he had reluctantly touched it in the first place. He returned to the den without a word.

Later, she lay alone in bed, staring at the ceiling fan as it slowly turned. Its path was a circle. She felt hers was more of a spiral.

The only thing that made sexual intimacy with John tolerable was how non-intimate it was. He would squeeze her breasts, peck her lips, thrust once, and be done. She would be left sore from the slight penetration without arousal, and wet from the semen that did not make it far into her, certainly not far enough to get her pregnant.

When John came to bed several hours later, Catherine rolled to her side, her back to him. After awhile she remained restless, so she quietly dressed and left the house. She drove to the Brown Bear where she sat at the bar, her finger swirling through the condensation on her mug of frothy beer.

She thought about William. The man he had become was nothing like the boy Catherine remembered. The priest was condemning and cautious, not vital and sensual, although she suspected he was still angry. It seemed like William had been angry from the first time she had seen him, in the fifth grade when Father Ray hauled him off for fighting.

Still, Catherine remembered William's gentleness the most. The first time they made love, he was trembling with impatience, and she thought he might force himself on her. When she wanted to stop because his effort to penetrate her hurt, he lay burning beside her for an hour, just holding and kissing her, before they tried again.

She had never had another lover like him, a man who would sometimes pleasure her and then let her fall asleep without satisfying himself. He had spoiled her for other men, or maybe it was just that he was the only man who had ever truly loved her.

Certainly, John did not. From her first night with John, when he orgasmed immediately and then snapped that her pleasure was her own responsibility, she knew she was a convenience for him, like a toilet.

"I can't buy you another drink until you finish that one," said a voice beside her. She turned to see a man with short red hair and a goatee, smiling at her. His teeth were unusually white and straight, as if they were dentures, but his big smile, made quirky by full, uneven lips was naturally effervescent.

She shrugged. "Not as thirsty as I thought I was."

"Jeff Donissan," said the man. He reached his hand to Catherine who shook it politely. "You a local?" he asked.

"Catherine." She took a sip of her beer and looked him over from the corners of her eyes.

"I'm here from Wisconsin. Photographer with state tourism. Ketchikan is doing something right, so we're here to find out what."

"Wisconsin. Isn't that by the Great Lakes?"

"Yep." Pointing as if a map hung between them, he said, "Minnesota, Wisconsin, Lake Michigan."

"Cheese?"

Jeff laughed. "Yep, cheese." He gestured at the bartender who was wiping glasses and asked for another draft. The bar catered more to locals than tourists, and was already thinning out. Jeff turned his back to the bar and surveyed the room. "I spent the day at the dock. Figured I saw all the tourist stuff, and I noticed this place. Nice." He cracked open a peanut shell and let the nuts fall into his mouth.

"Well, I can tell you Ketchikan has the best scenery in Alaska."

"Yes, you do," said Jeff emphatically, his eyes sparkling in the low lighting.

Catherine turned away, restraining a smile. "And fish, especially during spawning season."

"The place where man and fish come to spawn'. Isn't that your slogan?"

Catherine rolled her eyes. "The brothels have been closed for fifty years."

"I took a tour of Dolly's House. Wow, it must have been something to see, like the Old West was still going on into the 1950's." He ate a few more nuts. "So what do you do?"

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"Therapist."
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"Like a shrink?"

"Yes."

"Hmm." He took a long drink of his beer, and Catherine watched his Adam's apple slide as he gulped. He was an athletic man, with layers of muscle defining his sturdy neck. He finished and said, "I guess that's going to make this harder."

"Make what harder?"

"Charming you into showing me some of the sights."

"If you saw Dolly's and the shops, you've seen the sights."

"It seems to me there's a lot left to see." His white smile expanded as his eyes wandered down her body.

"Well, you could always take a flight to the fjords or the glacier. Fishing offshore, hikes into bear country."

"That all the wildlife I'm going to find around here?"

She tried not to smile but could not help herself. She appreciated his wit and brashness. When she wiggled her banded finger, he dismissed it. "I'm not looking to get married." He leaned toward her. "I'm staying at the Cape."

The beer she was drinking was just beginning to lighten her mood, and her resentment for two men—the one she hated for his indifference and the other for his absence—had her feeling sorry for herself. Not that she needed a reason to sleep with a stranger. She finished her mug and said, "They have honor bars in those rooms, right?"

Jeff slipped off his barstool, and Catherine let him take her hand.

Once they arrived at Jeff's room, there was little pretense. Catherine dropped her jacket on a chair, and Jeff offered her a drink. Before she could get her second sip, he was rubbing her shoulders, and she set the glass down. His hands drifted up to her head, raking through her short blonde hair. Like cool metal, his nails dragged enticingly across her temples and down behind her ears, sending chills along her spine. When she realized a man had not touched her like that in years, defiance fired her arousal. She had a right to pleasure.

She drew Jeff down on the couch beside her and took hold of his face with both hands. His full lips were fleshy but not tender, and they closed on her mouth like an assault. The light taste of hops and cheap aftershave took her back to her youth, reminding her of adolescent rendezvous, of William.

Jeff untucked and reached under her yellow satin blouse. He squeezed her breast through the lace of her bra, his thumb strumming her nipple as if he were a skilled musician, and as his mood shifted from witty charm to sincere lust, he took on the air of a wicked god.

Surprised at his intensity, Catherine drew away, but when Jeff leaned over, poised for prey, she surrendered. His mouth grasped and began to suck on the taut cord of her neck. Her eyes rolled back, and the lazy pleasure that swelled through her forced them closed. As his mouth massaged her with sensual heat, she let her thoughts wander back to William.

Senior year had been the best year of her life: rapturous nights with William, and a bright future at the University of Oregon. It had also been the worst, after his college choices rejected him and his father killed himself. Distracted by his internal struggles, William withdrew emotionally, leaving only his body to share with her, and while alcohol escalated his self-absorption, dreams of seduction began to haunt Catherine in the night—nightmares that wore the face of the town's priest.

Jeff bit her throat a little hard, and she pushed him away.

"Sorry," he breathed hotly. His reckless smile returned.

With impatient hands she pushed him away, peeled off her shirt and bra, and fell on top of him. He growled seductively as he wrapped his broad hands around her breasts and mashed them against her chest with slow deliberation. "At your command, my love." He stuck out his tongue, flicking the end, his green eyes saturated with dark fire.

She simply blinked at his juvenile antic. She felt she knew Jeff quite well already, so she did not worry that some stranger might make her life into a lurid news story. She understood motivations and had a knack for manipulation, which was what made her a successful therapist. People were people, no matter where they were from, and she had never met one she could not manage.

As his fingers pinched her nipples, her blood surged. She kissed him, biting his lips and teasing his tongue with her own. As his eager lips caressed her mouth, his hands slid into her jeans. She gyrated against him, and they writhed together until Jeff moaned, "We gotta slow down."

After he caught his breath, he slipped her low-heeled loafers from her slender feet then freed her from her jeans. He bent to lick her naked thighs, but before his tongue touched her, she grasped a handful of his silken hair and pushed his head back. He winced playfully and stretched his tongue, as if he were desperate to touch her. She throbbed in response, yearning for that touch. After she released him, he licked along the tendon that curved inside her thigh.

He drew back and pressed the heel of his palm against the wet patch on her panties. Pressing into the engorged folds of her intimate flesh, he dragged the material in large circles. The direct assault drove her head backward in ecstasy, and she cried out

with joy. Her happy cry dwindled to a whimper as his determined hand rhythmically groped the pink satin.

His mouth replaced his hand, sending heat from his breath over her panties like fog spreading across water. His tongue swirled across the material, engulfing her in steady heat, spreading the fire deep into her. Then he left her and peeled his oxford shirt over his head. He dragged his jeans down so fast that his boxers followed, but caught on the generous bulge between his legs. After he dropped his boxers to the floor, his meaty erection bobbed expectantly before her. The rugged flesh, knotted with pulsing veins, was so pale it took on a blue cast, and the swollen head throbbed nearly purple with blood. Curly red hair covered the livid skin of his abdomen and thighs, and lines of muscle and tendon folded into his groin. His entire being seemed to be surging into his thick prick, which dripped a single tear.

Her lips curled over her teeth as she slid her mouth down the shaft.

He flexed his hips and moaned.

As if savoring melting sugar, she undulated her greedy tongue under the sensitive pad where his vacant foreskin had once attached. He expelled a monotony of grateful whines before he gasped, pulled away, and fell to his knees, breathing heavily as he stared into her lazy eyes.

His face tightened with a feral gleam when she tossed her panties across the floor and turned around, resting on her hands and knees. Behind her, she heard him fumbling, then tearing the wrapper of a condom. She let her shoulders drop and rested her head on her hands. When she wagged her ass in the air, she heard Jeff breathe, "Oh Jesus."

When his hands took hold of her hips, and his thighs straddled hers, she braced herself on one hand and reached the other down to guide him into her. She humped against him, and Jake clawed her hips with sweaty hands.

She spread her legs wider and arched her back, trying to release every tense muscle. He manhandled her lithe hips, rotating her with ease beneath him as he began to plunge his cock into her. He raised his leg, setting his foot on the floor to gain better leverage, and with blissful moans, she became a limp wave buffeted by his urgent pounding. His thrusting escalated, and with wet greed, her body swallowed all he gave her.

"Good?" he gasped through labored breathing.

Her face was pressed against the carpet, and drool puddled around her cheek. She could not even form the word "yes". She exhaled with an agonizing groan, and felt as if she breathed out her very life.

The pleasure was beyond any understanding, an absorption of every sense that left no thought for anything beyond the beast inside her. In that moment of absolute pleasure, he began to pull out completely and punch-fuck her battered body. His weight drove her to her stomach, making access difficult, so he flipped her to her side and yanked her legs apart.

"I had no idea you were such a nasty girl." He held her leg over his shoulder.

She writhed, churning her hips in ecstasy against him and slapped at her clitoris with her clumsy fingers, desperate for orgasm. As she sank into the deep waters of hedonistic oblivion, a manic stream of violently erotic images filled her mind. Hungry men, straining with lust merged into an orgy of sweat-soaked flesh, and in her fantasy, she surrendered to a jungle of meaty cocks.

Jeff's ferocious thrusting unleashed repeated catastrophes of pleasure until Catherine's arousal gathered force and orgasm shed her passion like an avalanche. She convulsed with hysterical cries, as if everything inside her might be expelled.

"Yeah. Oh yeah," Jeff groaned. He continued to pump into her until he, too, shouted his pleasure, and his entire body clenched before he rolled over with a grunt of exhaustion.

She heard his ragged breathing and felt the heat radiating from his body. The insanity of sexual ecstasy was gone, but she luxuriated in the feeling of deep violation, the contentment of having herself disappear in that altered reality, if only for a moment. She was relieved of every bodily ache, satisfied of every craving, soothed from the bite of interminable emptiness.

"When can I see you again?"

Her bawdy laugh infected him with hesitant laughter. She dressed as he watched. "Good luck in Wisconsin," she said as the door closed behind her.

She cracked her car window as she drove home. The cold night air invigorated Catherine. Like good meditation or a prolonged prayer, her mind was left empty of care. She had no sense of herself as she pulled into her garage. She had no sense of the eyes watching as she closed the garage door behind her.

# Chapter Three

For a week, William had paced beneath a tall spruce and stared into the upper windows of Catherine's house. The recently built three-story had high, irregular windows, so she had not bothered to curtain them.

He had seen her arriving late one night, leaving her car with a smile and lazy eyes. She had smelled like sex, like sweat, like a man, and he realized she had never stopped lying to him.

That evening, she stood completely naked staring out her upper window, as if she knew he was watching her. With a discipline borne of resistance to the wolf, William refused to relieve the sexual ache. As a man who remembered each life stage for the type of pain that formed it, William defined himself more by what he struggled against than what he desired, so his vows meant a great deal to him. Surrendering to desire would mean a further loss of control that might leave the prerogatives of the night to the wolf, or worse, to the demon. As he sat looking up into her window at her naked form, he thought of the many feelings he wanted to share with her, revelations he had made about life, about love.

After seeing Catherine at his office, William had spent and evening listening to his recording of the musical "Hair". He and Catherine were of the generation that knew the movie, a decade after the musical. Over the years, as he traded in his vinyl record for a compact disc, the music became relevant because it reminded him of Catherine. He remembered her dancing with rapture to "Hare Krishna" the year the American hostages were taken in Iran and Mother Teresa won the Nobel Peace Prize.

His heart hurt. He was now living in the Age of Aquarius and wondering what had changed besides him and Catherine, and anyone else who had ever believed love could save the world. He indulged his heartbreak enough to imagine he might leave the priesthood and make up for lost time. Absence is sometimes a bond as strong as any other, and like an unshared secret, time had only forged a deeper impress to his memory of Catherine.

Nostalgia for the vigor of his youth overwhelmed him, and he was so preoccupied with his internal struggle, he failed to scent the wolf that made its way along the bank. A nearby grumble surprised him, and he turned to see the animal studying him. As if seeking a friend, the wolf edged toward him.

William seethed with indignation at the intrusion, but more than that, he burned with resentment for the longing he could not kill. The hapless wolf offered a distraction, and the voice told him that life required death, that he had the power and the right to take whatever he needed. The voice reminded him that he was an alchemist, transforming warm flesh and fluid into a cooling pool of death. He was a god undoing creation.

When a malicious pleasure surged through William, he launched himself, and the force of his two hundred pound rage crushed the wolf to the ground. He clamped his iron jaws around the small neck and drove his victim to its back with a squeal. His sharp teeth pierced the wolf's neck and snapped sinews, and then William worked his alchemy.

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William felt closest to God when he was alone, but at the same time, the demon taunted him only in his solitude. It had taken many years to know the difference. He had been confused those days in the jungle, and the voice echoing in his head had seemed madness at first. As he fought it, and it remained driven by its own purpose, he began to believe it was real, and it told him things he thought only God could know.

In his senior year, William's abusive father had committed suicide, Catherine had betrayed him, and his three applications to colleges had been denied. Catherine would be attending the University of Oregon, and William would be left at home, helping his ill mother and two younger brothers manage a failing fishery. So William did the most selfish thing imaginable: he left in the middle of the night, penning a vague note meant to worry as much as to inform. By the time he regained his senses, his mother was dead from cancer and his two brothers had left for work in California. He still did not know where they were.

Alone and angry, William had found solace in that encouraging voice offering him a bandage to heal the rupture in his life, to fill his hungry soul. "What do you want, dear William?" it had asked. Although William had never answered, it knew anyway, giving him the means to vent his anger and find a justice for others that he never found for himself.

How satisfying it became to punish abusers like his father, to track down cruel men held unaccountable and make them account. The beast he became each night offered no atonement, merely an end, so hell must surely have followed for those evil men, where

they could commiserate with his worthless father. Only when his heroic mission began to cost innocent people their lives, as vigilantes and desperate police did their worst, did William realize that he, too, would be held accountable.

As William stepped through the forest, he reflected on what had brought him home. *Catherine*. He tried to believe she was a symbol for his lost youth, lost passion, lost dreams. Now that she was in his life again, he realized she was no symbol. She was a woman with all that meant.

A future. That's what he had lost when Catherine had betrayed him. Even his choice to enter seminary was an acknowledgment that time had stopped. The fluid movement of past, present, and future had congealed like some dead thing, and he was waiting out his penance, each day grasping at the hope that it would be his last. How long would he have to hear that taunting voice pluck at his hard-won bestial silence in an attempt to raise the savage chorus of murder?

"Do you hear her screams?" the voice hissed. William's ears alerted on the distant sound of a woman in pain, but her scream was mixed with the others. Sometimes when the demon spoke, it seemed to bring all of hell with it, as if it opened a door or amplified a distant crowd. People groaned with grief and hatred all around him, and through the din of suffering, William heard the piercing scream of a woman. He had worked tirelessly to control his hunger and rage, but with his emotions in turmoil, his will was not his own.

The patience he had cultivated over nearly two decades had been reaped in the few weeks that Catherine had been back in his life. He could be a hero again. Wendy's frequent bruises told him all he needed to know, but his offers to help had been politely ignored. He assumed she was frightened or lonely, or whatever it was that kept women living with hateful men.

He turned reflexively from his path and galloped down the bank to the Freeman's house. His massive wolf body weaved through the front yard, around a rusted boat and a pile of saws. He turned the front door handle with his teeth, but it was locked, so he raced around to the back of the house and tried the back door, with the same result. When children's wails syncopated those of their mother, frenzy seized William, and he leaped through a window.

He landed on a couch and slid onto a coffee table made of crates that splintered under his weight. He rolled onto the floor before his sturdy legs lifted him up and rushed him through the house. He bounded up steep, tunnel-like stairs into the center of the Aframe to find Joe shouting and hitting a closed door with a wood baseball bat. Every time

the bat crashed against the wood, Wendy screamed, followed by the children, who were barricaded with her.

A threatening grumble from William turned Joe toward him, the bat raised. "God damned dog!" he shouted.

He swung.

William stepped out of range, causing Joe to stumble as his miss threw him off-balance. William could smell the alcohol emanating like a cloud of condemnation. Joe teetered unsteadily to his feet, trying to frighten William with bluster as he shouted and flung his hands around. He fell back against the wall for support.

William's fury grew cold with deliberation as he observed Joe while the demon whispered encouragements. Justice requires payment. Mercy is for victims. William's heart raced. Adrenaline brought every nerve to life. He was a god, and judgment belonged to him.

Letting go of rationalizations, William became the animal he was, seeing only meat bracing itself before him. He recalled the stringy tug of resistance presented by oily human sinews, and he would relish the blood-swollen liver, even if it were diseased from alcohol.

Parched from five years of abstinence, William quivered as he anticipated the end of his drought. When Joe picked up a small knickknack table near a window, William dove at him, bowling him to the floor. He clamped his jaws around the whiskey-soaked throat, drowning the shrill screams until they became merely gurgles of blood. Joe's bowels released, the stench sudden and engulfing, but the irresistible iron tang of blood had already filled William's mouth, and he continued to feed.

William released the throat to gorge himself on fuller flesh. He tore at Joe's tender abdomen, pulling out what entrails his teeth could reach. Like a starving man feasting at a banquet, he snatched bites from the tattered body as Joe thrashed with what muscle and reflex remained. William gulped down as much as he could between breaths as Joe's body stilled. When sirens grew close, William dashed from the house.

# **Chapter Four**

After William had vomited for the last time, he took a shower and dressed. He sat on his bed, his shaky knees refusing to support his weight. He repeated his prayerful invocation, but it failed to remove the memory of torn flesh or the bitter mingling of whiskey, warm iron, and excrement. For the second time in a week, William felt insanity sneaking into his mind like a reckless thief.

Suicide was the only solution. He had finally accepted that it was a delusion to believe he could resist his diabolical nature forever. His death would save others an even more horrible one, and who would miss him? Finding his body would be nothing like when he found his father hanging in the basement. The police or maybe the janitor would find him, not a boy. He considered the many ways he might do it, calculating the cost and time, before he shook the thought away. Death did not frighten him, but eternal damnation did. Suicide would mean he had no hope—that he had given up on God. That was an unforgivable sin, and the only one, it seemed, that he had not yet committed.

William felt the familiar paradox of physical vitality and a diseased conscience. Satisfying his hunger meant surrendering to his violent impulses, every meal an orgy of rage celebrated over the body of a victim. Despite the voice telling him that just one more meal would assuage his every need, surrendering to one desire always kindled the fire of another. His full belly only emphasized his sexual starvation.

Covering his face, William rocked and prayed, reducing his requests to receiving only enough strength to get him to the church. His prayer was answered. He made it to his feet and trudged the short distance through the drizzle to the church. Once inside, he made his way to a pew and pulled the kneeler down. He fell to his knees before the Blessed Sacrament, resting his weight on the seat in front of him and clasping his hands together. He rested his chin on his knuckles and closed his eyes.

He was still praying before the tabernacle when Catherine entered the church. He failed to notice her right away, but when he glanced and saw she was crying, he rushed from the pew. When she reached for him, he let her fall into his arms, and she pressed her face into his shoulder. She was dressed for work, in a rayon skirt and pumps.

After he held her for a while, he asked, "Are you hurt?" He glanced at the two other worshipers who had only recently arrived, before guiding her from the building, across the wooden sidewalk to the rectory next door.

Catherine's crying had dwindled to shudders, and after William brought her a mug of hot coffee, he sat down with her at his dinette-style table.

"I'm sorry." She took a sip from the steaming mug and sighed as it calmed her. "I haven't filed yet. I haven't even moved out, and he had me served. He changed the locks as soon as I left. I went back to confront him after I got the papers, and I can't get in. The papers say he's charging infidelity, and claiming the house and Benny are his."

"Benny?"

"Our dog."

"You have a dog?" William had never heard a dog barking at her house.

"He hates Benny."

"The court will look at what's fair. John's trying scare you. I'm sure his lawyer advised it. Have you talked to your lawyer?"

"I guess that should be my next step, huh?" When Catherine sniffed and tried to dab her nose with a small wad of tissue, William left and returned with a new box.

"You're doing everything you need to, Sulli."

"Did you hear about the killing last night? All I could think when I heard was it's the creature that's been watching me. It killed Joe Freeman right in front of his poor wife and children. The police said it could have been a dog, but Wendy said it was the biggest wolf she'd ever seen. She's lived in Alaska all her life."

"She saw it?"

"I just keep thinking that could have been me. Every night I feel something watching me from the forest. That poor family. I was counseling the mother for addiction." When William showed surprise, Catherine quickly added, "I'm not breaking confidences. Wendy's really open about it. I figured she had talked to you, too."

"I heard the husband was an abuser."

"The state took the kids once because she was neglecting them. I don't know how she'll manage now. She may have to move in with her mother."

William felt as if he would vomit again, although his stomach was completely empty.

"Are you all right, Billy? Look, I was just so shook up by the papers, and then hearing about the killing. I feel a little unraveled today." She rested her hand on his. "This might be good, having my best friend a priest."

William's chest tightened.

"You're not all right, are you? What's wrong?"

He shook his head. When she stood to leave, he stood with her, panicked at the thought of being alone. "Maybe you could stay for a while?"

She sat back down, still holding his hand. "Sure. I'll call in sick."

He rested his other hand on hers, thinking how small she was. Her skin was pale and unblemished, a little less buoyant than he remembered, but smooth as a fawn. Her gentle fingers tightened around his, and her breath deepened, casting the swell of her breasts upward in inviting waves. When he glanced into her eyes, he realized her words about friendship were a lie.

A flicker of hope eased his mind for a moment, and he seized on the thought that everything could change. For a moment, he believed love could change the world, could change him, and he longed for that smoky voice to whisper into his ear, to goad him down the path that would make his defection from every virtue complete. Like the dawn, Catherine's warm gaze held so much promise, and he knew he needed no help to become a man as reckless and unfaithful as his father. When self-loathing overcame his hope, he suspected his love was merely another lie.

He drew away, wrapping his hands around his cooling cup of coffee. He did not notice the knocking until she pointed. He rose and opened the door.

A policeman removed his hat. "Mr. Osbourne?" The man's hair was precise, as if it had been cut around the rim of a bowl. He wore a dark blue uniform and held his hat under his arm. "I'm Officer Lindsey. A neighbor reported seeing a large animal in this area early this morning. Did you see or hear anything?"

"Uh, no, Officer. Slept soundly."

Lindsey looked William over. "We found some animal tracks by the driveway," he added, his thumb hooking in a gesture behind him. "We'll have conservation identify them, but they look like wolf to me. You might want to be extra careful going out late or very early. I assume you heard about the attack last night?"

"Terrible. So you determined the attack was made by a wolf?"

Lindsey shrugged. "We had some maulings here about twenty years ago--a rabid dog, if I remember the stories, but a wolf in someone's house? Mrs. Freeman swears this was a giant wolf with teeth like tusks, but I've also heard she..." He paused and tipped his hand like it was a bottle pouring into his mouth. His lips tightened once before he added, "Call the station if you notice anything." With the suspicion that seemed bred into

such men, Lindsey allowed his probing eyes to graze the interior behind William, before he smiled politely and left.

William returned to the table and sat down tiredly. "I should see Wendy. There will be funeral arrangements."

"I have an appointment with her this afternoon. Are you all right?"

"Queasy."

"I can make you some eggs."

William made a noise like he was choking. "God, no." He rubbed his temples and asked, "What's the most important thing to you, Sulli?"

Catherine smiled affectionately and held his hand again. "I'm not complicated." She shrugged. "I'm just glad to be alive."

William smiled back. He hated life. He feared the heap of days that weighed against his paltry pile of redemptive acts, and he worried that the longer he lived, the less likely he would make it through the narrow gate he preached about so often.

He had presumed too much and despaired too often, when the truth was somewhere in the middle, near humility. Despite all those virtues he had failed at so miserably, one still remained, the one the demon had set him up to fail at by whispering in his ear, in his dreams, and in his conscience until he thought coming home was the right thing to do.

"I shouldn't have come back," he said, more to chastise himself than to confide in Catherine.

"I'm glad you did."

He stared at her for a long moment before asking, "Because you think we can pick up where we left off?"

"I'm not that naïve, Billy." She played with his fingers. "You're too good a man, the best I've ever known, actually. I guess it's only fair that God should get you instead of me. Maybe that's why he had you leave. Maybe he kept you away just long enough. But that's quite a sacrifice." Her eyes sparkled with humor. "The rest of your life, no sex. That's a lot to ask."

William forced a weak smile. "Oh, Sulli, there are worse things, and that's no comment on my wonderful memories of you. Besides, do you really think a God who put his only son on a cross would hesitate to ask a sacrifice from any one of us?"

"Aren't you supposed to say it's a gift, a commitment of love?"

"A gift? I suppose it offers gifts, mostly in degrees of humility. If you ever meet a dedicated celibate, he'll probably be the most humble person you'll ever know."

"So that means I haven't?"

William smiled and glanced away, feeling his cheeks heat as if he were a flirting schoolboy. "Where did you hear it called a 'gift'?"

"I had some interest in priests awhile back."

William's eyebrows rose together as he turned back. "Interest in priests?"

"Father Ray once told me people get the whole celibacy thing wrong, so I looked into it myself."

"Wrong how?"

Catherine laughed. "Doesn't matter. He lied."

"Did something happen, Sulli?"

"No, nothing."

His mind drifted back to a day spent in an empty cove. Her body had fit to his with perfect symmetry, curve for curve. He shook the image from his mind and settled on the course he had been reconsidering. He was a man with a vast interior life, and he knew Catherine lived almost entirely outside of herself. For that reason more than any other, he did not believe she would understand. She was a therapist, and presumably educated in the complexities of the human psyche, yet she still seemed like the girl he had known—a sensualist who trusted only those feelings that made their presence known on her skin, not her heart.

"Sulli, I need to tell you something." After Catherine gestured for him to continue, he said, "I didn't come back to Ketchikan sooner because something happened to me in the jungle. You know how you hear your voice speaking in your mind sometimes, telling you things? Well, I heard one that didn't sound like mine. I thought it was God."

"What does God sound like?"

Her question surprised him. "Don't you ever hear God?"

Shaking her head, she tapped her temple. "No one here but me."

He pressed a palm to his chest. "God speaks here, and what's said is often something you don't want to hear." When Catherine offered no reply, William continued, "Of course, I thought I was crazy, hearing voices, but it made me feel better. At least I wasn't alone. It was so real and so different from me—the way it thought, the things it wanted me to do."

"It told you to do things?"

"You've probably had patients tell you things like this, but this is different."

"What do you think it was?"

"A demon."

"A demon?" Her eyes grew worried.

"A long time ago, you asked me if I believe in evil, remember? I believe in it because I carry it around inside me."

"Don't we all?"

He acquiesced with a nod. "This is not just my conscience."

"Why would a demon talk to you?"

"They talk to everyone, Sulli. I just happened to be stupid enough to listen. Angry, full of self-pity, alone--it was like living in a dark cellar. I got used to the cockroaches and worms, and stopped noticing, but in the sun, those things don't come around. We can live in the sun, but they can't. By the time I found the light again, it was too late, because I carried enough darkness around inside to keep it safe."

"Is that why you became a priest?"

"I knew it wouldn't go away. The best I could hope for was control. I didn't feel called to the priesthood exactly, more driven. I thought about Father Ray, what he had represented, like my father who was such a hypocrite, acting pious on Sunday, screwing everything with two legs, and slapping me around the rest of the time."

"Wait a minute," interrupted Catherine. "What do you mean about 'control'? Have you done something, Billy?"

William clenched his lip between his teeth, overwhelmed at the prospect of all he had to explain and how unlikely it sounded.

Catherine sat back. "I'm just trying to understand."

"Then, you believe me?"

"You're far too sane for your own good. Tell me about this demon. Can you talk back to it? Do you have conversations?"

"Yes," replied William slowly, suspicious of Catherine's easy acceptance.

"Does it do things, like move furniture, or is it just a compelling voice?"

His lips tightened. "Maybe you should leave." He rose and walked to his door.

Catherine stood, too. "You know, Father Ray's retired. He's at a home for priests in Oregon. Maybe you should talk to him. Maybe the demon you need to quiet is really just one from the past."

William let his hand fall from the doorknob. In a way, he was grateful she did not believe him. As he dropped his arms, she fell into his hands. His body ached with an unfamiliar hunger. The appetite that threatened insanity almost every night would remain

an ember until that evening, when it would engulf him, but the need triggered by the feel of Catherine in his arms found its locus in his groin, where blood began to surge.

When Catherine pressed her hips against his erection, William caught his breath. Like an abstinent alcoholic taking his first sip of whiskey, he grew dizzy with euphoria, and he pulled her tightly against him. He stood holding her, unable to let go.

She smiled and peered up into his eyes. "I would be taking advantage of you if I suggested we go upstairs."

He tried to smile with her as his chest constricted. "Take advantage? As I remember, that's all I did in high school." He released an awkward laugh and felt as if he were falling. "I remember the creativity it took getting you alone. I'd have my hands up your shirt before you knew what was happening."

Her lovely brown eyes danced around the pain. "You never took advantage of me, Billy Osbourne. I always made sure you got me alone." She stroked his cheek and drifted from his hands.

# Chapter Five

"Do I know you?" growled the brittle old man in the wheel chair. "What do you want?" He wore a frayed gray sweater over a tan turtleneck, and his bone-thin legs leaned against an arm of the wheelchair, propped up by the footrests. Arthritis had curled his hands into claws and hardened his knuckles into rocks. His fingernails were stained and scaled like yellow mica.

William had taken a flight to the mainland, which took twice as long as it should have due to a storm. Now, he was staring at Father Ray and not recognizing him. The man William recalled was tall and well-groomed. This man had oily gray hair that touched his shoulders, although the top of his head was bald. The disturbing blue eyes that had seen right through him at eighteen were now cloudy with cataracts. "Father Ray?"

The man's shallow eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

"William Osbourne. Billy. I lived in Ketchikan when you were pastor at Our Lady of Divine Mercy, about twenty-five years ago."

"Osbourne?" Ray looked William over, his eyes stopping at his clerical collar. Ray laughed, a thin, wheezing laugh that turned into a cough. When he stopped, he had to wipe tears from his eyes with the back of his contorted hand.

"You remember me then?"

"Course," snapped Ray, his humor drying up.

After glancing around the recreation room at the few men sitting lifeless, William asked, "Would you like to take a walk? It's cool, but the rain stopped."

"Get me my coat and a blanket."

Billy got a plaid blanket from an attendant, and spread it over Ray's lap before they left for a paved walkway. They traveled past groupings of trees whose early fall foliage covered the blue sky with steady fire. "I'm the pastor of Our Lady now," said Billy. "What do you remember about those days?"

"Your mother," said Ray flatly.

When Ray did not offer more, William stopped, locked the wheels, and came around the front of the wheelchair. He stuck his hands in his pockets. "I don't remember much about her."

"Course not. You were busy dodging your father and messing around with that Sullivan girl." The pinched bitterness left Ray's face for a moment, he now appeared to be just a sad, old man.

"Was she special to you?"

Ray looked up at him with the discerning gaze William remembered. "Nothing improper, but she was special, yes. Your mother was a special woman. Why she ever put up with that man, is beyond me. Good Catholic woman, I guess. Vows and all that." He made a sound like spitting, though nothing left his lips. "I heard you went to China or somewhere."

"Thailand. I was there for a few years before coming back to the States. I went to seminary out East."

"Weren't you the one who rigged my toilet to overflow? Just when I thought it was safe, you'd do it again, and I never did figure out how you kept getting into the rectory. Once, in the middle of winter, you changed the locks on my doors before I returned from a conference. I remember going door to door like a beggar, looking for help that night. I couldn't tell your father half the things you did. Knew he'd take a strap to you. Sometimes I thought that might be the only thing that would get through that thick head of yours."

William scowled and looked past Ray. He saw his father as he always remembered him: above him, malevolent teeth, jeering.

"Why are you here, Boy? You think I don't know?"

"Know what?"

"There comes a day when you realize it's just part of you, and you aren't responsible for it anymore. Little-by-little, you put it out of your mind, forgetting what you did the night before, and life gets easier. And then you find some boy empty and angry enough, and the demon leaves you for greener pastures. But I warn you, it's not the blessing you think. You find you miss the company." Ray hunched his shoulders against the cold.

William looked Ray over, trying to make sense of what he heard.

Ray gazed up at William, his expression forlorn, his ragged gray eyebrows blocking much of his eyes from view. His voice sounding older, Ray said, "Full of piss and vinegar when you were young and slave to that girl's pussy when you got a man's

body. No one could tell you anything. You knew it all. You still think you know it all." He struck the air with a scoffing hand. "If you think virtue will make you happy, you're full of shit."

Of the questions that came to mind about Ray, his life, his choices, William asked only, "What is it?"

"I don't have answers for you. All I know's the one who gave it to me was a cheap cunt." Ray scooped his thumb through the air. "Gutted her like a fish." Absent of all but a few teeth, his ghastly smile dwindled.

"I don't understand," muttered William as he looked around for a place to sit and found none.

Ray studied him for a long time then said, "Course you do. Now, take me back." Ray crossed his arms and began chewing on nothing. He refused to say another word.

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When William returned to Ketchikan, he checked the newspaper archives in the library. As he flipped through the Ketchikan Journal on microfiche, some memories returned, like the year Max was state wrestling champion and the fire at Our Lady's elementary school. There was even an article about the vandalism he caused at the rectory. After an hour, he found some reports about a rabid dog attacking pets and a jogger. The jogger lived, but twenty pets were missing or found mutilated over a four-year period. Nothing unusual for Ketchikan with all its eagles.

William continued to research, and came across some unsolved murders in towns and rural areas throughout the Inside Passage, from Washington into Canada. He found a string of mutilations of prostitutes whose throats were torn. They had been exsanguinated, an act attributed to cultists. That was the era when hysteria about Satanists had people seeing them in every daycare center.

William sat back, a peculiar mixture of relief and despair adding to his other paradoxes. The demon had possessed other people. The realization that Ray was now free elated William, but his elation crashed when he realized the price for that freedom was cursing someone else.

# Chapter Six

Catherine sipped her coffee, her eyes shining with an interest that William knew was more about being alone with him in the rectory than talking about his meeting with Father Ray. He had asked her to stop by after work one evening, and they sat at his kitchen table.

William tapped his steaming mug and glanced at his watch. "Father Ray was in poor health. Not at all the robust man I remember."

"I heard he has some degenerative disease."

"He didn't say. We talked about the past, when he was here at Our Lady. He really did hate me for making his life miserable, but it sounded as if he had some amount of compassion, too. He said he didn't tell my father everything because he knew I'd get beaten."

"It was no secret," commented Catherine. "I'm sure lots of people protected you."

William found it odd that anyone in Ketchikan had ever had compassion for him. "He told me some other things. He knew about the demon."

Catherine set her cup down. "You told him about that?"

"You're not the first person I've told, Sulli. Every time I've gone to confession, the priest examines me with questions to judge my competence. He usually insists I talk to a therapist."

"You tell other priests about the demon?"

"Of course. And the killing."

"Killing?"

Her question surprised him before he remembered that he had not told her everything. "Joe Freeman is dead because of me."

"He was killed by a wolf. Wendy saw it."

"I was that wolf."

Catherine surveyed William with curious eyes. "So a demon tells you to kill and you turn into a wolf?"

"I can't prove it to you, at least I won't try." When she pursed her lips and nodded as if his story were merely convenient, he relented. "The beast you saw outside your house. That was me, watching you."

"That thing felt evil."

He reached his hand to hers, but she drew away.

"Sulli, I would never hurt you."

"Why were you there?"

"Just to see you."

"And the mutilated animals?"

Clenching his jaw, he turned away.

"Sweet Mary," she muttered. "What's happening? Maybe you're dreaming or even sleepwalking, and then you read the papers and learn the details. Blood? Do you find blood on you? Torn clothes? Wounds?"

"That police officer came to my door because there were wolf tracks in my yard."

"Crissakes, Billy. There are wolf tracks in every yard in Ketchikan."

"Ray did this to me. He admitted it."

"Father Ray?" She took a drink of her coffee. "So did Father Ray kill people too? Was he a wolf?"

"I think he was something more like a vampire."

A sudden interest extinguished Catherine's sarcasm. She looked away, her gaze introspective, as if she were calculating.

"I also think he was the Fisherman. Remember the murders along the Inside Passage? They stopped when I left. They stopped because I took the demon with me."

William watched Catherine's disbelief transform into something like horror. "I always thought it was a nightmare," Catherine said softly, as if she were trying to reconcile the idea.

"Look, Sulli, I have something I want to try. Whether it works or not, I'll probably be locked up in jail or an asylum the rest of my life."

Catherine was waiting.

"Exorcism."

She closed her eyes.

"Look, Sulli, it's getting late. You should leave, but I wanted you to know. I'm going to contact the diocese for a medical leave, and then go back East. There's a priest I know with experience in this sort of thing."

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Catherine waited on a cement bench near a row of trees as a nurse wheeled Father Ray across the courtyard. After her short plane flight, she had been waiting for almost an hour until he woke from his nap. When he reached her, she let the nurse lock his wheels and return to the building before she greeted him with, "Hello, Ray." She stood and paced, her hands in the pockets of her jacket. She wore a plaid skirt and knee-high knit socks--the outfit she knew Ray liked.

"What do you want?" snapped Ray after a few minutes of watching her pace.

Stopping, Catherine looked him over carefully, from his rubber boots to his flannel overshirt, touched by oily strands of white hair.

Now Ray looked her over, and his face lit up. "Haven't seen you in awhile."

"Why confuse Billy more than he already is?"

"He always sailed a little too close to shore."

"What the hell does that mean?" Before Ray could answer, she sat down and leaned toward him, her eyes blazing. "I sent him here so you could ease his conscience, you old shit, not tell him stories about vampires." She examined him carefully, trying to see the virile man she recalled from her adolescence, trying to imagine that man driven by evil and not finding it nearly as difficult as she thought she might. He had never hurt her. If he was the vicious man William claimed, why had he only tried to pleasure her?

Ray reflected her heated gaze with nearly vacant eyes.

"It's true, isn't it? You told Billy the truth."

An ugly smile spread across Ray's face, and his shrill laugh stiffened the hair on her neck. "You going to show me your cunt?"

"Those dreams you wanted me to tell you to get you off, they weren't dreams at all, were they? You were reliving the past. How did you get into my room?" She paused to catch her breath. "How did you get me to think it was a dream? Damnit, Ray, tell me what happened!" She had been visiting him since his retirement, seeking the reason for those nightmares of awful pleasure from her high school years. He had been lying to her from the beginning.

His feeble eyes took on a glamour look that Catherine remembered from her dreams. "Hell, girl, I couldn't do anything what you didn't want more of. I liked to scare the girls a little, but I couldn't scare you." He laughed, but then his face drooped with regret. "Going after easy cunt meant I spent less time looking for blood. I lost my taste for killing."

"How many nights did you come to me?"

"Oh, my girl," giggled Ray. "So many, but you really shouldn't remember any."

"The demon gave you this power?"

Ray wailed, "When it left, I had nothing! Nothing!"

"Is it what you wanted, Ray? Did you get what you wanted?" Catherine slouched and looked away toward the ridge of trees bright with the fall foliage. She wondered at a creature with the power to know one's unspoken desires and to serve them. It did not sound demonic at all. "Why didn't you kill me, like you killed all those prostitutes as the Fisherman?"

Ray brightened at being recognized, but then the energy drained from his face. "Cunt ruins every man. It's God's plan."

"How did Billy get it from you?"

He licked his dry lips. "You gonna show me your cunt now?" The lecherous soul he had concealed so well when he was younger expressed itself without restraint in his old age.

After glancing around to be sure no one else was around, she set her feet on the stone bench to either side of her, rolling her hips back and spreading her legs so that Ray sat staring at her crotch at almost eye level. Her skirt had flipped back, and she slid her hand into her white cotton panties, rubbing her fingers around her wet slit as she told Ray how good it felt.

As his breath grew wheezy, he coughed a few times and reached a trembling hand into his loose pants. "Let me see it!"

She smiled indulgently and pulled her panties aside, giving him a peak. "I shaved it smooth just for you."

Ray groaned and his whole body shook. He came with a choking sigh then pulled his hand from his pants. His breathing remained labored, and his face grew pale. He seemed to be struggling to talk.

Catherine watched him as his white cheeks bloomed with spidery, red streaks then drained again. His eyes bulged as if he were strangling. His feeble hands shook and reached out for her. She drew back and watched with fascination as he died. When he slumped over, eyes vacant, breathing stilled, she masturbated herself into ecstasy.

# Chapter Seven

William heard the door open. He muttered an invocation that he often used to help him focus. "Sit nomen Domini benedictum." As with most Catholic parishes, Saturday afternoons brought in many fewer penitents than there were sinners, and William had been sitting in the confessional for twenty minutes without a single visitor, before he heard the chair creak as a small weight filled it.

On the other side of the wooden screen, a woman cleared her throat. "Forgive me..." The woman paused. After a brief silence, she said, "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned."

William's heart raced when he recognized Catherine's voice.

"It's been, let's see, maybe five years since my last confession. I, uh, don't know where to begin. I've done too many things. I'm sorry for all of them."

William waited, but it seemed Catherine was done. Sometimes penitents needed help. "I wish I could say that was good enough, but you need to face your sins with greater acknowledgement. What do you most regret?"

"That you never accepted my apology."

A rush of heat broke a sweat from him, and he felt light-headed. He did not want to have this conversation.

"Is that why you're a priest now," she asked, "because of my betrayal? Did I do this to you?"

He knew her immature faith should have alarmed him, but he was only amused. She had always lacked the awareness of where she ended and other people began, but he made allowances for her self-absorption now, as he had when he was young. "Becoming a priest," he said lightly, "is not the worst thing that's ever happened to me."

Catherine did not acknowledge his sarcasm. "I thought I was a burden. I slept with Thom to give you an easy way out. I did you a favor."

When Catherine mentioned Thom, William's amusement faded. A mistake, a moment of pride, a lifetime of loneliness. The senselessness was almost maddening, like throwing away a lottery ticket a day before it becomes a winner. How different life would

have been if he had forgiven her. The demon, the wolf, and the sickening crimes would not be indelible memories. His thoughts began to loosen as they rushed to the past. As he struggled to clarify his feelings, they spilled out to Catherine. "I didn't want to leave, Sulli. I wanted to die. You were all I had. Without you, I just wanted to die."

"I expected you to come back."

"You were going off to college. I knew you'd meet someone there, a man to give you a family. That's what you wanted." He stopped himself, paused, and then continued, "We should talk about this later. Do you have anything you want to confess?"

"Yes," she said reluctantly. She sighed, and William heard her cheerfulness return as she said, "I've taken the Lord's name in vain at least two thousand times. I've stolen notepads and pens from work. I call my sister in Juneau and tell my boss it's business. What's that, three commandments already?"

William massaged the bridge of his nose. Penitents never started with their real concerns, and he suspected Catherine would lie to him regardless. It took time to work up to embarrassing truths. "This is between you and God."

"Let's see. I mentioned the women, didn't I? The women, yes, there have been five. Janet was the first, a biker. She taught me so much about my body I didn't know. Every part of skin is potentially sexual. After that, I dated Andrea. She could spend all day between my legs."

William felt faint. He took a deep breath and released it as quietly as he could.

"Dana—you remember Dana Long, from the class ahead of us? She was a volleyball player."

William remembered the long-limbed center with thighs like sculpted marble. His voice cracked as he asked, "What did you do with her?"

"What didn't I do?" Catherine stifled a laugh. "Oh, I miss the feel of a woman's legs around my head."

William leaned forward and wiped his wet forehead. "You don't sound remorseful."

She hummed, and then said, "Oh, we love our sins, don't we? Is that three? Number four was Angie, the lap dancer from California, here on a cruise. Those few days were sheer hedonism, and John joined us once."

"You had sex with John and this woman at the same time?"

"Angie really knew how to manage people in bed. And the last was Rachel. She had been married once and had a son. I felt especially close to her, I think because I wanted a child at that time."

"Is that all, then?" William asked, trying to sound phlegmatic.

"I hate John. Sometimes I imagine hurting him. Thoughts of pushing him down stairs. Impulses, you know?"

"I want you to pray with me now, Sulli."

"I pray all the time, Billy. I prayed that I would see you again. I miss loving you." William closed his eyes. He found himself unable to speak.

"I never felt so close to anyone as I did to you. Do you remember senior year? Of course you do. I'm sorry about your father. What he did. What happened. Hell, about everything. But there were good times, too. I hope you still think of them. That empty cabin we found. Your birthday at the lake, remember your present? Oh, do you remember finding Max and Robin on Married Man's walk?"

William smiled at the memory of Max and Robin entwined like cats in heat behind the Creek Street tourist shops, where legend had it that men snuck into the back of the old brothels. Naked and sweaty, his friends had rolled through a nest of the ubiquitous Ketchikan slugs, and screamed so loud, someone called the police.

"And prom night," Catherine added. "I remember everything—how you smelled, your warm skin. Do you remember?"

William found his voice, but he choked his words through a whisper, "I was a stupid boy with too much testosterone, thought if I died in the jungle you'd feel guilty the rest of your life."

"Stupid with hormones," said Catherine, and William heard a smile behind the voice. "Yes, that's how I remember you."

He realized he was clenching his fists, and he eased them open. He locked his hands together on his lap. He spoke the words of absolution then said, "You may say a prayer of contrition now."

"You haven't given me penance," said Catherine.

He told her to recite a decade of the Rosary every day for the next month. As he heard the doorknob turn, he admonished quietly, "And quit stealing things from work."

Her laughter fell like gentle rain as she left.

# Chapter Eight

Catherine had known, in the way any melodramatic teenager knows, that the right thing to do was to let the love of her life go. He needed to roam, to find his limits, to be a hero. In her adolescent fantasy, she expected it was all about her, that he would come back for her. She had waited, but he had not come back. Even when she was away at college, she kept track of who was coming and going back home, always asking with circumspection of old friends whether they had heard anything of William.

Now this madness. He finally returned to her, as a priest. Anger heated her neck yet again. She hated him for that, and not because it meant he was beyond her reach. She knew that was not true. Priests were men, after all, as simple, needy, and faithless as other men. But William had chosen God over her.

Trying to hold back her tears, she told herself they were tears of anger, because she would not allow a man to make her a victim. William was right: she did not want to lose. She was not a convenience, a second-choice, or recreation. She told herself she had no desire to be loved, only to be satisfied, and her histrionic sexual hunger had never yet been satisfied.

The beep from her cell phone startled her. She dug it from the bottom of her purse, expecting John's voice apologizing for working late, although she knew he not only worked late by choice, but also had no real reason to go in on Saturday.

She did not at first identify the breathy voice that echoed her hello. "Who is this?" she asked.

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"You don't recognize my voice? Not that we did much talking."
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Jeff?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;You remember!"

<sup>&</sup>quot;How'd you get this number?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Billy."

<sup>&</sup>quot;You know Billy?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;I know everything about you, dear Catherine."

Her mild surprise became irritation. "I don't want to see you again. I told you that. Your resourcefulness doesn't impress me, and you're not the stalking type. Believe me, I've met them. Go back to Indiana or wherever it is you're from." She disconnected and tossed the phone on her couch.

She hated to be alone, but none of her friends were available until late that evening, so when her phone rang again, she answered quickly.

"I thought you might have changed your mind."

"In twenty seconds?" She disconnected with a flourish and stood staring at the phone in her hand. When it rang again, she let herself dwell on the delicious memory of Jeff's hard body on hers. She decided to sound haughty and answered the ring. "How do you know my number?"

"I told you, I know everything about you, dear Catherine."

Her body had begun to respond with wetness between her legs. Her heart pulsed more quickly, warming her limbs with excited blood. She recalled his patient erection and the musky masculine scent of his sweat. She imagined his hands groping, and she caught her breath. "If you quit the creepy talk, you can come over. You'll have to be gone in an hour. I'm meeting some friends for drinks."

Before Catherine had time to change her clothes, she heard a knock on her door. She opened it. "What? Were you calling from your car?"

Jeff's enthusiastic smile greeted her, and he nodded. "As a matter of fact."

She offered him a drink, but he declined and peeled off his shirt. She looked over his lean torso. "Not even a little conversation?"

"You said we have an hour."

She smiled and unbuttoned her shirt. She pushed him onto the couch and pulled his jeans and boxers low enough for his erection to pop out. She fell to her knees and slid her wet lips around it.

"Oh, that's good, baby." He rested his hands on her head, guiding her as she bobbed over his lap. He reached down and fondled her breasts, ending with a pinch of her nipples. After watching her work for some time, he drew her up and laid her on the couch.

He stripped her naked and fingered her soft pussy, but when he moved up to enter her, she stopped him. "Didn't you bring anything?"

"What's it matter?"

"It matters."

He snatched his pants from the floor and took out his wallet. He pried a packet from one worn leather pocket and fought with the plastic for a short time before it finally opened. He unrolled the oily latex, and once he was covered, he squeezed the base of his thick erection, letting the head bulge as he stared down at himself with pride.

"Like it?" He wagged it at her.

She lay back and spread her legs.

Jeff dragged her hips toward his. He lifted her legs, grasping one ankle in each hand and began to drive his cock into her with a precise rhythm.

Flickering worries that her husband might arrive were extinguished from Catherine's thoughts as she sank under a wave of rapture. In that moment of extremity, she lost awareness of everything but the few centimeters of flesh surrounding the exquisite masculine shaft, and yet, as her focus shrunk, her mind seemed to expand. As if she left her body, she experienced a bliss that made her feel as if she had touched God.

Jeff spread her legs wide to watch himself work. His magnificent torso strained with deep striations of agile muscle. Sweat dripped from his chin and nose, and his chest glistened. Engorged, shiny veins along his biceps and forearms gave him the look of man made of pink iron, and the friction inside Catherine's snug sheath felt no less like metal.

Dizzy with pleasure, she imagined herself again entwined amid a swarm of sexually voracious men. And then an image of Jeff took over, intruding into her private fantasy with a leering gaze as the other men parted to make way for him.

She opened her eyes to see the same expression of evil delight darkening his eyes. Terror took hold of her, and she kicked at his grip. He released her ankles but seized her hips and flipped her onto her stomach. His strength was overwhelming, and she realized she had no hope of stopping whatever he planned.

He dropped his weight on her and pressed his mouth against her ear. He whispered in a voice like fire, "You're so empty, unbearably empty. You need more. You know you're alive only when it hurts, don't you, dear Catherine? I'll show you how alive you are."

He pushed her hips down and spread apart her flesh. He speared his meaty cock into her tight, resisting anus.

She tore at the cushions, crying with pleasure and pain until the initial sting passed and left her relishing the exquisite violation. His effort drew guttural moans of exertion from deep in his throat.

He pulled her to her feet and spun her to face him. He was breathing heavily, his wild eyes insane with violent passion, and he kissed and bit her mouth. His hands raked

across her body as she slipped away. When she reached her door, she realized he was not following.

She turned back. He stood stroking himself, leering at her again, oblivious, it seemed, to his trespass. She wondered if he were as ignorant as he seemed, and then realized he was not ignorant at all. As she stared at him, watching lust steal his good sense, arousal surged through her again. He was an animal, his passion purely physical, selfish, uncivilized. It was not power he was after, but corruption. What had seemed evil was only lawless, and she decided she had no problem with that. She walked back to him.

He lifted and pushed her to her back on the couch. He slid into her sloppy pussy, abusing her through clenched teeth with words about her wantonness until his tone became playful. "What would Billy say about you, dear Catherine? You would never have a chance of stealing him from God then, would you?"

She slapped him, and the heat of the moment evaporated as a coldness took hold of her. The loathsome animal using her body was again intolerable, but she could not stop him. The pleasurable pain became uncomfortable again. She wanted it to stop. She wanted to destroy the thing using her. She wanted to kill it.

"You can't kill me, dear Catherine." He left her and disappeared for a few seconds into the kitchen, before returning with a filet knife. He tossed it at her feet. He stared at her through a moment that seemed pregnant with disaster, as she braced for his attack. He charged. As he wrestled her to her stomach, she fumbled for the knife, and when she grasped it, she found herself on her back, wrists pinned to the floor.

Jeff's smile beamed, but his green eyes were shadowed in the dim light. "Kill me," he said, losing his breath from the exertion. "You want to kill me." He spread her legs with his knee, and she strained against his hold, the knife poised to plunge into his neck if he released her. And then he did, and the knife and her hand were flung forward, stopped only when the tang snapped after it had sunk three inches into his neck.

Wide-eyed, paused mid-breath, Jeff dropped on her. Blood spilled over her face, and she frantically shoved the weight off as she scrambled away. She threw the bloody, broken knife from her hand. After staring at Jeff's unmoving body, she ran to her bathroom to wash the blood away. Several towels were stained before she got control of her thoughts, reconstructing what had happened. The taunting, the knife. The attack was sudden; it seemed contrived, a game, unreal.

She tried to leave the bathroom but could not make herself cross the door's threshold. Then she thought of calling William. Only William could make sense of this. She left the bathroom by the other door and entered her bedroom. She sat on the bed, and

when she reached for the receiver, a voice from over her shoulder said, "You can't kill me."

She leapt to her feet, looking around the room. Seeing nothing, she stared at the doorway, expecting a bloody Jeff to walk in, but after a long moment, she returned to the phone.

"No one will believe you. You murdered him. Do you think Billy can help you? What will you tell him?"

"Who's saying that?" she hissed with fearful anger.

"Your life is ruined. There's no point in living. Billy will never be yours."

"Who are you?"

"It's been a miserable life anyway. No one will miss you. If you kill yourself, Billy will always wonder. When he finds you dead, he'll blame himself. He'll regret leaving you, rejecting you. He shouldn't have left. It's his fault that your life turned out like this."

She turned around, searching the room, the ceiling, wondering if a speaker were hidden somewhere.

"Go to the bathroom. Get the bottle of pills. That's why you have them anyway. You knew this day would come. You don't have to deal with this. It's not your fault. The pills will make it easy. You'll just go to sleep. Sleep would be good. No more problems and everyone will know how badly they treated you."

She was tired. Yes, she was tired of fighting everyone. She observed the lighted bathroom, considered the dark hallway, and walked into the living room.

She saw Jeff's body laying still, his head resting in a crimson puddle. "Is he dead?" she asked. She glanced around, expecting a reply before she realized she was probably hallucinating. She got her cell phone from her purse, preparing to call the police.

"You can hide the body," the voice said. "No one will know. No one knows he was here."

She shook her head. "It was an accident. I didn't mean to."

"He hurt you, mocked you, and wouldn't stop when you told him to. How many other men have done that? Think of all the men you've known. They'll come forward and say what they did to you and how you let them. You let them. You hate yourself. You hate them. Like John. You want him dead, too. They should all be dead for how they treated you. You deserve justice."

"I should call the police."

"Then there's no hope. No future. The rest of your life in prison, everyone knowing what you were doing with him, that your perverted sex game turned deadly while your dedicated husband was working. Everyone will think John is telling the truth, that you're a selfish bitch who used him. Everyone will feel sorry for him. He'll win, Catherine. Do you want John to win?"

"Shut up!" Catherine flung her arms out, striking at nothing but air. After she wore herself out, she sat down and stared at the unmoving body at her feet. If she drove his body out to Deer Mountain, no one would find it until it had been savaged by the wildlife. She could clean the floors and burn her clothes. She needed trash bags to wrap him, to keep the blood from trailing to her car. Could she carry him? It was late. No one would see her dragging him to her car trunk. She wondered if outrageous thoughts becoming sensible choices meant she was insane.

After wrapping the body in plastic, she lost her breath in surprise when the phone rang. She stared at it until it stopped, and only then realized it was probably her friends calling to see where she was. She answered their question in her mind: she was drinking alone, watching television, and fell asleep. She glanced at the television and impulsively walked over and turned it on before returning to her task.

Dragging the body through the parking lot to her car had not been as difficult as she'd thought, but when she was driving south around town, she realized that getting the body into the woods would be significantly more difficult.

Parts of Jeff's body were already growing hard when Catherine pulled it from the trunk of her car. She managed to slide it over the edge, and let it fall to the ground. Despite the cold drizzle, by the time she had dragged the body to the top of a ridge, she was sweat-soaked, and the adrenaline that had fueled her thus far left her shaky.

She tore off some of the bags wrapped around the body, thinking to attract animals better, and then she let it roll down the hill. It stopped in an awkward twist among the leaves; the wad of clothes and shoes tumbled farther. She had the odd sensation that she should say something--a final farewell, a prayer. She barely knew the man, but she was sure he deserved better than this.

"You deserve better," the voice said, lending Catherine's fear a bitter edge. She clung to that, feeling more comfortable with resentment than guilt. No, this was not her fault. Jeff had pushed and pushed, even after she had clearly shown her disinterest, and then he played his game of manipulation. He was dead because of what he did. She had not chosen this, but now she was burdened with dispensing of the evidence. She was the victim.

Despite the drizzle that tapped the leaves and the chirping crickets, it was the horror of the silence inside that overwhelmed her.

After she returned home, she tried to scrub out the bloodstain from the brown carpet. When she realized it could not be removed, she took a full bottle of red wine and shattered it on the spot. She practiced an apology for her husband as she put her towels and shirt in the oven and burned them to ashes.

# Chapter Nine

The olivewood beads were darkened by oil stains from the many years that William's fingers had counted through them. The sterling crucifix, scapular medal, and links were nearly black with tarnish. The elegant rosary draped over his hands as he knelt beside his bed on Saturday evening and began reciting the Glorious Mysteries.

Before he had finished a decade, he heard a knock at the rectory door downstairs. He dropped the rosary on his bed and trotted downstairs. When he opened the door, Catherine smiled, her red cheeks brushed by the white fur of her ski jacket. She hopped over the door jam, bringing the cool air in behind her.

William shivered.

She stripped off her coat and dropped it.

"Sulli, really, you should leave. I was just getting ready for bed. It's very late."

"Offer me some coffee or something."

He wiped his forehead and wondered how he could be sweating when he was cold.

She picked up her coat from the ground and pulled out a flask, then tossed the coat away and sat on the couch. After a drink, she offered it to William, who shook his head.

Catherine seemed to deflate, appearing small, as she had the first day William saw her at Our Lady. Her hands fidgeted with the silver flask. She sat with her loafers aligned precisely beneath the legs of her black jeans, as if they lay in a closet. Her navy sweater wrapped her in an inviting angora softness.

Once, he could have built his life around her, and he wondered how they would be different if he had. He made a silent plea for his unbearable yearning to end.

"You ran away from everyone who needed you."

He did not want to have this conversation, but he realized she needed it, and she deserved answers. "What I did was unforgivable, and I ask forgiveness anyway."

"That's not good enough. I spent too many years waiting. You accused me of using people to build myself up, but you're the selfish one. You've always been the selfish one." Her jaw flexed a few times, her brown eyes coming to life with anger.

She stood. "You went off to become a hero. Look at you." She pointed at his collar before flinging her hands out in disgust. "I bet you even sleep in that thing. You're a courageous, solitary bulwark against excess, a champion of virtue, beholden to no one. You call it sacrifice, but it's really protection. No messy relationships, no compromises. You make all the decisions. You set all the limits."

Her anger dwindled as she stared at him. Her shallow breathing deepened, and when she stepped close to him and reached her mouth to his, he received her as if he were finishing a kiss paused a moment ago. Her hands slid up to his neck. As her warm lips yielded to his and her tongue traced his teeth, the image of a disordered riverbank, strewn with lace and ribbon, came to his mind.

They had never shared smooth cotton sheets and idle time. He recalled furtive encounters on the grass, picnic blankets, and many nights on the cracked leather of his Ford. He wanted to roll with her onto his flannel upstairs, with no concern for who saw or what else they should be doing. He wanted to experience the casual sense of entitlement to her body that a husband knew. As he dropped his arms, and his hands held her hips, his body ached.

When Catherine pressed her hips against him, William gasped. Her breath was like wine, a tonic to soothe his erotic agitation. As if she were made expressly to be filled by him, her supple body trusted its weight to his hands. He rubbed her back, and then wrapped his arms around her. Blood pounded in his ears as she whispered that she loved him.

He tried to return the words, but he could not stop kissing her. She tasted like cinnamon or apples, and then their mouths were struggling, and her hands were pushing. Not until she had seized his shirt in her fists did he realize she was pushing him away.

In a trembling voice, she asked, "Do you remember what you used to say about love?"

He shook his head, unable to think beyond the throbbing in his body.

"When love becomes lawless, it's not love at all." She pressed her hands against his rapidly rising chest but would not look into his eyes. "Love includes a future. All a minute can give you—all I can give you—is relief."

Relief was all he needed. He tried to kiss her again, but she resisted. His hands left her back and tightened around her arms. He forced his mouth against hers until her knee incapacitated him. He stumbled back, hands holding his groin as he sat in a chair.

Nausea broke a sweat from his neck; a familiar sensation that meant the demon was hovering about. He looked up to see Catherine observing him with placid eyes. She had no idea the turmoil she caused.

"Get out!" he snapped. "You shouldn't be here this late."

Her eyes narrowed, but she did not move. "You're leaving in a few days. Will I ever see you again? Do you really want to go?"

"Of course I don't want to go, Sulli, but this is impossible, isn't it? You're right. I just shouldn't have come back to Ketchikan." He could taste his frustration like bitter iron, as if blood filled his mouth, but he could not swallow. Heat prickled along his neck and raised the blunt hairs there, and he felt the flush of heat swell from his head downward. He wanted to smash something.

He started to shout an obscenity, but his breath left him in a rush. His chest tightened painfully. He clutched his shirt, wondering if he were dying from a heart attack, and tried to speak. Catherine reached out a hand, but then withdrew, terror draining the rosy hue from her cheeks. A moment later, he was staring up at Catherine, whose wide eyes fixed on him as she backed away.

Catherine did not look quite like herself. She was less vibrant, almost colorless, livid like a corpse. William realized he was seeing through the wolf's eyes, a black-and-white clarity that drained compassion from perception and reason from action. Catherine's scream aroused him, and her flowery perfume faded beneath the delicious scent of her musky skin. The sound of her racing blood sped his own. He saw the cold evil flooding her core like a tantalizing drink for a parched soul. He knew her guilt; he yearned to taste her sins.

"Judgment is yours," whispered the demon. "Satisfy justice. Fill yourself."

William attacked so quickly that Catherine did not have time to raise her arms in defense, and she fell before him like a doll. He tore into her throat and fed until he had to pause to catch his breath, and when his belly was full, he galloped from the house to the mountain. As he raced through brush into the darkness of the deep forest, the echo of Catherine's scream seemed to grow louder. As sense slowly returned to him, he knew the sound; he had heard it before, a sin so grave that it shouts to heaven for justice.

When William awoke sometime later, the sun was just rising, its dim rays cutting through the lower branches. He pushed himself to his feet and brushed off the crackling

brown leaves. The fresh air, the spicy scent of decaying leaves, and the churlish breeze had him feeling refreshed. Then he recalled his night. So unexpected and oppressive was his memory that he stumbled to his knees. He fell face forward into the leaves and screamed a denial. When his hands tore at the leaves, he saw they were crusted with blood. Tears mixed with saliva as he sunk back to the ground and cried himself out.

"Do you really believe the world is drenched in grace, when the god you serve has given you to me?" asked the demon into William's ear. The usual gloating had grown vicious—the demon was not finished driving home its point. "What has your obedience gained you? You didn't ask for this life. You don't deserve this suffering. If your god is all-good, explain me. If he's all-powerful, then explain me."

"Everything you say is a lie."

"You know who I am. You know what I can do."

"You can do nothing. The choice has always been mine."

"Do you think you're ready to argue theology with me, dear William? You've worn that collar for twenty-two years. I've been alive forever. I've debated Creation itself, and as you can see, I won."

# Chapter Ten

Catherine was not sure how she had reached Juneau. She thought she had just left William at the rectory in Ketchikan, although that now seemed days ago. She found herself walking through some distressed neighborhoods, before reaching the club scene in Alaska's capitol. The warehouse bar was trendy-gray block and neon that gave an industrial feel to the exterior. Dark velour clothed the interior, a nostalgic recreation of a teenage bedroom filled with black light, posters, and candles.

As she walked through one of the three bars in the large building, the pounding club music drowned out the crowd's conversations both around and inside her head. She heard people talking as if they spoke into her ear, and yet she attached those voices to people across the bar.

As her eyes passed over each person, she knew their thoughts. She knew their limits. She knew that the man in black jeans and a cowboy hat would give her a long, sensual evening with the intention of proving his former wife wrong. A couple with matching red shirts would secretly videotape her for their amateur website. Then, she eyed a man who was eyeing her, a young, handsome man with the well-funded appearance of a stockbroker. He wore a designer shirt and linen slacks, but what caught her attention was the vicious heart, draped in cowardice.

After walking with slow intention toward him, she reached up and introduced herself with a shout in his ear. She let her fingers trace a line across his crotch.

"Let's get out of here," he shouted.

Catherine left with him and his friend. She climbed into the back of the late model sedan, and let the friend, Nick, fondle her breasts. Nick drew her onto his lap so he could suck her nipples, while Doug watched in the rear-view mirror, his feeling of good fortune evoking exclamations of "Fuck" over-and-over again.

When they reached Doug's apartment, the three left the car, and rushed upstairs. As soon as she was in the apartment, Catherine began to strip off her tight skirt and tank top, wondering when she had had time to change her clothes from the jeans she had worn with William.

"Don't you have any more friends?" asked Catherine, offering Doug a coy smile along with her bra.

"I got all the friends you want." Doug took the bra and a long look at her naked breasts before leaving the apartment.

While Doug was gone, Catherine sat on a green couch, arms resting on two cushions as Nick knelt between her thighs and worked on her clitoris. She did not notice Doug's return with two more men until their excited hands began to heat her skin. They explored her as if they were in a race. Fingers plunged into her wetness momentarily, and then withdrew as others followed in turn. She encouraged them with spread legs and happy moans at every touch.

Hot mouths descended on her. She arched her back and exalted as the rough stubble of a beard dragged across one nipple. She tugged and pushed on the hands and mouths, showing them what to do. In her fever, she slashed skin and bruised muscles that were not moving as she wanted, but before long the hands that had been pleasuring her were holding her down.

Her wrists were pinned, and a pressure her body had never known riveted her attention between her legs. An object stretched her pussy unbearably wide. She writhed but could not break free. When Doug came with a groan, his cock shooting onto her thigh, she saw he had been shoving the end of a bottle of beer into her vagina.

Doug rose and squeezed his flaccid penis, trying to bring it to life again. "Play with your tits," he commanded, and grunted when she began to roll her nipples between her fingers.

Despite the momentary pain, Catherine continued to grow wet with pleasure. As much as the men thought they were taking, she knew they were giving. As the men drained themselves of fluid and shed their lust, she felt radiant, almost bursting with energy. When Doug swelled again, Catherine realized she could rekindle their desire each time it waned with a mere thought.

"Maybe we should get something bigger than this bottle," said Nick.

"My dick," bragged Doug. His hand furiously jerked the shaft while his other hand tugged at his balls. He stepped closer and settled on his knees. He straddled Catherine and began to hump her face, shoving his fat cock into her mouth. When Catherine gagged, the men grew noisy, a cacophony of hoots and excited demands that he choke her.

She had lost control of the evening, and the sex began to feel as if it were something taken not given. She recalled the fantasy that had been with her for years, of

the obedient men torturing her receptive body with unbearable pleasure. This was not that fantasy. Her pleasure did not matter to these men. She reached to rub herself hoping to ease the pain with distraction, and the men thought she wanted more.

Doug mounted her and complained about her sloppy pussy, his own vulgarities heightening his fever. With each orgasm, the men's sexual appetite became more violent, and their orgasms achieved more quickly. One hardness withdrew to be replaced by another, and another, until her initial rapture of an emptiness being filled, of a hunger being fed, descended into anguish. Despite the unending supply of rigid meat, the chasm at the center of her only seemed to grow emptier as the night wore on.

She needed something more. More would be good. More was always good. She opened her eyes to see the men putting on their pants. They looked weary, and she silently raged at the failed promise of their virile bodies. She lay on the floor, sticky, bleeding, unsatisfied, and insane with a hunger that ached in every limb.

The men left one-at-a-time until only Doug remained. The evening had stripped his façade, as she knew it would. Now she wondered what he might do since he was without his friends. Would he withdraw, tell her to leave? As she stared at him, his brown eyes began to seethe and he grew hard again.

"Meat hole."

She smiled, pleased that his cruelty had overcome his cowardice.

He shoved her face into his lap. She gagged as body fluids from the evening mingled into a bitter, salty coating, but she sucked his prick so furiously that saliva foamed over her lips. After he came and began to soften, he tried to pry her off, but she would not let go. He tore at her hair, but he could not free himself. As she continued to suck, Doug screamed, the sound fading as his strength dwindled. She drew away from the shriveled, useless prick that had assaulted every part of her that evening and saw Doug sprawled on the couch, his wide, vacant eyes drying under the ceiling fan's breeze.

"You're a strong woman," said a voice, raspy with fire.

Catherine glanced around before she remembered the sound. She commented idly, "I thought you weren't real."

"Think of the women at the club that he would have tortured. You're God's soldier. You deserve to be happy. What is it you want to make you happy? What is it you need, dear Catherine?"

She smiled slowly as she considered the voice and its offer. She stared at the inert pile on the couch that had once been a very cruel man, and felt great satisfaction. It was well past midnight, and she decided she had several visits yet to make that night.

First, there was her husband.

## Chapter Eleven

William's eyes fluttered open. Wind whistled through a window near his head. He rolled to his feet, shocked by the icy cold floor now slicked from the steady rain. He wore only his black pants, but he did not know where he was. It was a rustic cabin, and all he knew was that he had slept the day away. He leaned forward and fumbled for the window sash, which he got hold of and threw down. He locked the window and sat back on the couch.

He sat with his hands on his thighs, piecing together the last twenty-four hours. His thoughts grew silent. After a few minutes in the utter darkness, he became aware of breathing nearby. Fear clenched his stomach and prickled the hairs on his neck. He eased from the couch.

"Don't worry, Billy," Catherine's voice was like music and calmed him. "I'm here to please you."

When she lit an oil lamp, he saw she was naked. In the same instant, she was beside him, her lithe body wrapping around his. As he tried to step away, he was entangled, his arms and legs weighed down. His muscles were weak, and every member of his body wanted to rest. He would have collapsed except that he suddenly found himself lying on his back on the couch.

Catherine's nimble hands stripped off his pants, and then the warmth from her skin enveloped him like an immersion in a hot bath. His muscles strained and then relaxed, welcoming her touch. She kissed his forehead, his cheeks, his neck, and shoulders. Her tongue circled each nipple before sucking it in and nibbling.

As her mouth moved down his body, her hips rubbed against his, heating his blood. With maddening delay, she worked her way down his torso, each inch peeling the years and resistance from him. By the time her tongue swept around the contour of his erection, he was groaning for release.

When her tongue returned to dig into his navel, her soft breasts rolled over his groin. He raised his hips against the pillows of her flesh. He wanted nothing more than to

sink his aching cock into her mouth, to have her worship it with the wild indecency she had as a girl.

"What would you do, dear William," she muttered, "to feel my lips around the prize you deprived me of for twenty-five years? Or would you like to fuck me as if you were seventeen again?"

Glancing down at her, he could only whine. He could not even raise his hand. He closed his eyes. What he would give, he thought, because he could not say it, was anything. For that sweet moment of release, for the single ecstatic act of filling her receptive body with his fluid, he would give anything—his chastity, his life, his soul.

He was no longer a priest, not even man. He was a boy again, driven by desires he barely controlled, little more than an animal, willing to dip his needy cock into any receptive hole. As he silently begged for that one moment, she drifted away. She stood at the foot of the couch, naked, shining with a light that did not emanate from the lamp, her skin like white satin.

She raised her hand, and his arms felt light again. She crawled between his legs, her face hovering just inches from his groin, her warm breath tickling like teasing fingers, her mouth just beyond touch. Her blissful eyes grew fierce, and she sat back on her heels and spread her labia with her fingers for him to see.

"I fucked my bastard husband to death."

His concern for her confession waned when he saw the inflamed folds between her fingers, their delicate pink membrane swollen red. The short brown curls that framed her feminine wound were matted, and she glistened all over from her own juices. He could smell the musk of her desire, and with each breath, he felt nearer to insanity. He wanted to touch the treasure of his fantasies—claim it—violate it. He surged with a sense of power, of viciousness, and yet he could not move. "Please," he managed to say in a hoarse whisper.

"The thing you call a demon gave you what you wanted. It made you into the thing you needed to be to do what you wanted to do. Is that evil? Am I evil?"

He appeared startled by her words. "No, Sulli." He was not answering her. He was begging.

"What do you hate more?" She stretched luxuriously, her arms reaching high over her head. "Do you hate that I'm no longer empty and yearning for our past? That I'm no longer waiting for you? Or maybe that your life is in my hands, that just when your hope returns, you have no future? The demon left you, didn't he? He found better companionship."

"You're fooling yourself, Sulli, if you think you control it. It talks and talks until you have to listen, until you can't hear anything else."

"You don't know what a trial this is, to keep you alive. The demon wants you. So do I. It tells me I can have you forever if I take you now."

"Don't believe it."

"Billy," whispered Catherine, a plea or maybe resignation. "We do the things we don't want to do."

She crawled on top of him and curled her hips into his, scooping his erection into her warm furrow. William groaned and arched his hips, and semen spurted from him in convulsive waves. His entire body locked in a spasm so sensually engulfing, he was not sure when it stopped. He shivered from the cold, and then he felt nothing. Absolutely nothing.

## Chapter Twelve

William found himself walking until he was outside his rectory door. Police tape guarded the entrance, but he walked through it and into the kitchen. When he stood glancing around at the brown-stained walls, he wondered why he had returned to such horror, and yet the horror signaled by the smears did not register. He realized he felt nothing, not even regret.

He sat at the table where he usually enjoyed a cup of tea, but even that desire remained remote. He tried to remember what day it was. He probably had a homily to write, but had no idea what the Scriptural readings were for the week. He considered television, reading, and finally decided he would just sit where he was until he was tired. But he never grew tired. The night passed into day and back into night before he thought that it had been awhile since he had eaten. He was not hungry anyway.

"Why are you here?" Startled, William turned toward the back door, where Catherine stood. "Why did you come back here?" She wore a glittering silver skirt and silk shirt, something she might put on for dancing. She glanced around at the walls and hugged herself as if she were cold. "I hate this place. Come on." She reached for him. "Let's get out of here. I can't wait to show you Juneau."

"Why not Los Angeles?" William and Catherine both turned to see the church janitor, Robeson, leaning on a chair, his face gleaming. "New York. Paris. Think big, dear Catherine."

Catherine's eyes widened with excitement. She reached again for William. "Yes, let's leave." She shook her head, her eyes beaming, and her chest swelling with excited breaths.

"You're truly alive," said Robeson.

William's eyes narrowed as he glanced from Catherine to Robeson. He knew he was not alive. He also knew the demon was the worst opportunist, preying on those already damaged. It seemed to specialize in men and women who had been victims of abusive love, and Robeson looked different to him now than he had when he was alive.

He looked less like the kindly, stunted-legged janitor and more like his father. When the thought occurred to William, he felt his heart stop, and then wondered how he could feel anything from a vestigial organ. Death was not at all what he expected it would be. He was so empty, so painfully passionless.

He thought when he died that somehow the mysteries of life and death would be revealed. God would be revealed. The border between life and death was supposed to be a door that opened to true life, but his thoughts felt more muddled than ever. He rubbed his forehead. Maybe he was not really dead.

Robeson hobbled over to the table and sat down across from William. "Is it not what you expected, dear William?"

Catherine wandered closer but agitation kept her fidgeting, and then she began to pace. Just watching her wore William out. He turned to Robeson. "Where are we?"

"The rectory."

William's eyes narrowed again. "Who are you?"

"The janitor."

"Let's go!" Catherine's pacing had grown frantic, like a caged tiger. She rushed over to William, sat down, and turned anxious eyes onto him. "Don't you get it? We can go anywhere—do anything. All we have to do is think of somewhere, and there we are. But we're not ghosts. People see us, feel us, and we feel them. Believe me, Billy. We can feel everything!"

William studied the pretty face of the woman he had once loved and wondered if he loved her now.

"I'm so powerful," Catherine added. "I see evil, and I can stop it."

"You're God's soldier." Robeson reached a hand across the table and touched Catherine. "Yes, you'll spare the world much suffering."

"Don't listen to him, Sulli. You can't save anyone but yourself. You make victims of other people, but that isn't God's desire for you. The only sacrifice he wants is your own."

Catherine's face puckered as if she had tasted something foul. "Is that all you learned at seminary?" She let her disgust drain away and smiled. "Don't fight it, Billy. We can be together forever."

William just shook his head.

"That's it, then!" Catherine stood, glanced at Robeson, and left the rectory without a backward glance.

"Is this Hell?" William asked Robeson when Catherine had gone.

"If you choose."

The first twinge of emotion snuck into William as he appraised Robeson. Although a curious mingling of hope and dread weighed him down, he managed to get to his feet. Robeson followed as he left the rectory and entered the church.

"What are you doing?" Robeson hobbled along, finding it difficult to keep up. When William slid into a pew, Robeson sat in a pew behind him. "Why come here? There's nothing for you here."

William sat with his hands in his lap and stared at the tabernacle. It seemed to radiate. It seemed genuinely alive in a way he did not remember. Robeson seemed to be chattering, but William ignored him. He knew Robeson had finally spoken the truth. *If you choose*. The demon had spoken the first truth William had heard from him in twenty-two years, and that meant he was, indeed, dead. If his current experience was what he made of it, then that meant he was in some sort of purgatory, and he had a chance.

Unsure when the demon left, he sat contemplating the tabernacle, the altar, and the Word. Parishioners came and went not seeing him, though he overheard their conversations. Sometimes they prayed for him, their pastor, who had disappeared one day, his body never found. They were sure he was dead, and some people claimed to feel his presence in the church, still, as if he were watching over them.

After weeks of contemplating, doubts began to creep into William's thoughts, and he wondered where Catherine was. He imagined being with her. He imagined saving people from human predators, being a hero once again. His emotional emptiness was becoming unbearable. As his doubts drove him nearer to racing from the church, he realized he could not leave. As if gravity had increased, he could not stand against the pressure holding him down, and he smiled as he recognized grace at work. He understood suffering was not necessarily evil; pride was, and helping people had always been about himself.

Everything was a gift, and he had no possessions of his own, not even his life. Like Catherine, he had sought to satiate his physical needs, denying the deeper meaning of neediness itself. The seed he knew as desire had one aim: to transform need, the mark of his humanity, into love, the mark of the divine. Denying his own neediness had made him blind to the true needs of others. They did not need him to save them. Only they could save themselves.

The longer William sat in the church, the more content he grew. He forgot about Catherine, forgot about his crimes, and forgot about himself. As he came to understand

the purpose of his purgatory, doubts about the value of his vigil waned and then disappeared, and one day, with a grateful sigh, so did William.

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With a seductive smile, Catherine eased into the seat beside a woman in a red dress. The woman's boyfriend sat next to Catherine. As he slid his hand over her thigh, Catherine spread her legs to allow better access, and his hand groped her pussy. The man smiled his appreciation as the monotonous melody of the club's music swallowed his greeting. Catherine only nodded. She did not need to hear his lies to know everything about him.

Taking the woman's hand, Catherine set it on her other thigh under the table, and encouraged it to join the man's inside her panties. She watched the two share a look that made her tingle with excitement. From their thoughts, she saw the sex they had planned for her, although she was not sure whether they planned to torture her, too. Such mysteries had become the true motivation for Catherine's pleasure, since they were so rare. Usually, she saw everything with dull clarity; she had come to learn evil required little inspiration, so she appreciated artists when she found them.

Someone caught her eye, and when Catherine glanced up, she saw a bearded man in a black linen suit leering at her. She excused herself from the table and pushed her way through several dancers gyrating near the table. She met the demon's blazing eyes with her own.

The man leaned forward and spoke into her ear. "So good to see you, dear Catherine."

Catherine smiled with gratitude, but then something nagged at her, something she had meant to ask. She spent a brief moment staring at the man's chest before dismissing the feeling that she was forgetting someone. Her smile returning, she gestured her delight with raised eyebrows and returned to her companions.

The demon observed the writhing crowd and his successful project sitting at the center of it. Catherine's giddy laughter suggested harmlessness. She swelled with her own power now, but the demon wondered if her humanity might resurface in death as William's had. Would she one day reach the heights of her power to avenge and feel inadequate? Would she reach the depths of isolation and feel an urgent need to reconnect? That's when his real pleasure had begun with William, when he employed temptation and torment like a craftsman wielding his tools.

Catherine had fascinated William, but it was not her beauty that had interested him, so much as her relation to an ideal he conceived as a kind of religion, the only

religion he trusted. It had been a fetishistic world that ultimately pointed him to its source in the absolute, and love revealed his disorder. Catherine, the demon was sure, had become a force of nature—the nature William had never truly believed in, the nature that had been unable to overcome his faith.

The demon knew Catherine would never speak of William again, because she would not remember him. Her evolution had ceased, and the path of her soul would continue its spiral like wire winding tighter and tighter, a ball of metal growing hard, unable ever to be unwound again. The demon knew Catherine's future like he knew his own. The only future he did not know was William's, and he felt a brief twinge of regret, although he did not know whether his pain was because his son had made the better choice or simply because the torment he had pleasured in for so many years was lost to him.

He took a deep breath and glanced around the club, before settling his gaze on a young woman who seemed intent on forgetting a recent fight with an abusive boyfriend. He straightened his blazer and made his way through the crowd to introduce himself.

# About the Author

Teresa grew up in Iowa and had a quietly painful childhood before marrying an emotionally inaccessible man. Marital attrition evolved into a renaissance of hedonism before she stumbled across the love of her life. She's a reluctant Mensan, a sexist Feminist, a resistant Catholic, a monogamous Bisexual, and generally incapable of any orthodoxy. She's authored novels and shorts in several genres of erotic fiction because she believes an eroticized equality will save the world.