

# **Angel Of Death**

e-book edition

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# Chapter 1

*(Wednesday, 10/23)*

On the day he moved in, they held a funeral; the flat grey morning sky already full of dust and heat. The small apartment was surrounded by dirty cars, parked casually, one or two even on the front lawn. The haphazard way the cars were left was so much like the barrio where Father Juan grew up that an unexpected smile came to his lips as he carried the last of his few boxes up the rickety back stairs. It had been a long time since the thought of home had made him smile.

The apartment was small, a loft over an old barn, now converted to a storage shed. The few windows, dirty and laced with cobwebs, looked out over the small North Texas town. Huge, light-skinned elms blocked most of his view out the east window, their huge leaves muddy colored and fragile. What he could see were mostly open fields, now brown and dry with the last bits of harvest and the occasional distant farm house, spotted easily by their surrounding clump of trees. From the window facing north he could see a handful of houses, two small stores, a barber shop, a run-down gas station and a small Mexican restaurant. It was a small town, as far off the map as a Father with his years of experience could be expected to find, and still wear a collar.

His new parish, Holy Family Catholic Church, was tiny, the flock mostly German immigrants from the last century. They had come to Texas answering an ad in a magazine, and had settled down to form a tightly knit community. The dust storms of the great depression had driven some away but the families that remained where as hardy and resilient as the native weeds.

Mixed within these Germans, like the occasional weeds in a field of cotton, were the seasonal workers who made their way north over the border every summer, only to slip back south after the last harvest. He knew that in early August the little parish had been bursting at the seams every Sunday with farm workers but by mid October it would only show a few faithful families, mostly lead by short dark women with round faces and stringy black hair; their Spanish as hacked and dry as the harsh desert farms they came from.

The previous junior priest had also been placed here by the Bishop. Reading though the scant church records, Father Juan suspected he had been caught embezzling the Church's money, possibly to cover a growing gambling debt and dumped here as a last chance to discover the grace of God. He had lasted three years, a good run for such a small parish. Father Juan had no idea where his

predecessor had gone but he prayed fervently that the younger priest had been able to make his peace with God. Grace, the grim redemption, the beautiful second chance that God offers to all who believe in him, was terribly important to Father Juan.

Father Juan knew almost nothing about the senior priest of the parish; Father Jacob, his new boss. Only that he was Jesuit by training and had worked in Alaska for many years before settling here.

Having put away the last of his few belongings, the priest was just tapping in the nail to hold the crucifix over his bed when he heard a knock at his door. The sound of the hammer must have masked the creaking of the stairs, he thought, either that or my ears are finally getting old. He carefully centered the cross, the face of the small Jesus looking upwards, eyes filled with sorrow, the mouth twisted in agony, and made his way to the door. Without thinking he slipped a finger under his collar and pulled it out from his neck. It was not yet noon and already he was sticky with sweat.

"How can I help you son?" he asked softly as he opened the door, trying not to show his irritation at being interrupted. Outside on the small porch was a boy of 14 or 15. Young man, he corrected himself. The boy was large, maybe six feet or taller and easily over 200 pounds. He carried the weight in his body well, standing at ease with the strength of manhood already showing in his shoulders and hands. His face, however, still carried the softness of youth. His eyes and skin were dark, his face round, his hair black. Having spent the early years of his priesthood in the Philippines, Father Juan was familiar with the look. Only there were small differences, subtle changes in hair and eye shape that made him curious.

The boy's voice was deep and hollow. "Please, paster, um, father," he stammered. "Mother asked me to invite you to the funeral." The boy looked down at his feet and then away. Shy and embarrassed, and something else. Father Juan opened his mouth to politely decline the offer – the idea of standing in a group of strangers made his skin crawl – when the boy spoke again. "Please, sir. It would mean a lot to her. My mother, that is." Then without a word the boy turned and walked down the stairs, his weight shifting and flexing the wooden stairs with each heavy step.

Father Juan was left standing at the door, hammer still in his hand. Unbidden, his mind turned to thoughts of redemption, forgiveness. "How faithless is that whore we call hope," he bitterly noted but even as he thought this, he put the hammer away and straightened his coat in the mirror. The slender hands tight and hard, the gaunt face worn with a few wrinkles around the edges, the eyes,

sad and dark, all told their own tale. Only his hair, thick and full, shot through with grey, still carried the promise of his youth. He tried on a smile, looking to his eyes weak and sad in the reflection, and then headed down the stairs. It's a new town he thought, a new place, a new chance. But even as he thought this, he could also hear the laughter in his head.

When he walked into the small apartment, the force of the people almost made him back out. Their sound and their heat made his head swim, made him want to hide in his room, resume his studies. Only the knowledge that it was his new landlord that had asked, made him stay. More than he needed to be alone, he needed this chance. He put on his best priest smile, what he and Bishop Sousa, back in seminary used to jokingly call their “holy countenance” and stepped into the room carefully, like he was wading into a fast moving river. The smells from the kitchen, the fast staccato voices speaking their sing-song English, lulled him into comfort. Even though his six foot, four inch, frame loomed over them, the people (Tongan? Samoan? he wasn't sure), made him feel at ease. He could not remember the last time he had been at a funeral in which he didn't have to preside, didn't have to be a priest. Here he was respected for being a man of God, but he was not the shepherd of this flock. He let the conversation flow over him, around him, cocooning him as he wandered about from room to room. Talking here and there, enjoying the delicious and spicy food. After a few hours he found himself in a small bedroom near the back of the apartment. The room was empty of the living, its sole other occupant a large man, dressed lavishly, laid on a smooth flat table, surrounded by flowers and photos. His hair was slick with new oil and recently trimmed. His clothing was spotless and well kept. Makeup, carefully applied, covered most of his face. He had the appearance of a rich fat businessman who had just stepped out of his office for a power nap. Only the lack of noise, the absence of the slow rising and falling of the chest, belied his true condition.

Years of priesthood and his own particular gift, had inured Father Juan to death. He circled the room, looking at the photos, the flowers, the man himself. Puzzling out the story of his life like some strange anthropologist sent to record the funeral of a forest tribe. The man had been fairly old and judging by his size, large even for a Pacific Islander. Father Juan guessed it was a heart attack that laid him down. Family photos showed the man as he had looked back when he first came to America. The severely short hair, the clean uniform, the stern look on his face, all bespoke of his military past; a Marine based on the uniform, a First Sergeant.

The family grew to four stern, straight backed kids. Their mother, his new

landlord, looked out of the photos younger, with strength and determination. Something he noticed on almost every new immigrant who came to America to stay. They know how to persevere he thought as he noticed the little details in the photos; the second hand clothes, clean and mended, which spoke of pride and poverty. Sometime later, a new child was added, much younger than the others. An accident? An adoption? No, the boy was definitely not adopted. With the exception of his height, he looked very much like his father, there was no denying that. He also was not very old. In the last family photo, his older brothers and sisters each had several children, but he himself looked to be only 10, maybe 12. Then Father Juan realized that the boy in the photo was the very one who had knocked on his door that morning. A pang of pity and understanding swelled though him making his eyes tear. He knew what it was like to suddenly lose a father at a young age. The grief surprised him, flooding his cocoon of emotional detachment, overwhelming his senses. He placed a hand on the table to steady himself, and openly wept, glad that he was alone. Tears fell as his chest silently shook up and down, up and down.

Finally, after a long while, Father Juan was able to control himself, able to put back together his carefully constructed priestly demeanor, able to leave the room. He walked back into the main part of the house and said his goodbyes, giving his new landlord a careful, yet heartfelt hug. Then he made his way out the door.

The air outside was hot, but cleared his mind like a splash of cool water. He welcomed the control, the emotional distance it brought. He stopped at the base of his stairs to let his thoughts settle and his heart slow. He took a deep breath and let it out forcefully. Then just as he raised his foot to begin his climb, he heard the thump, thump, thump, of a basketball bouncing on the pavement. The beating stopped, then it was silent. Finally the silence was broken by a ringing “klang” as the ball hit a metal backboard, followed by the clean “shoosh” of it slipping through a net. The thump, thump, thump started up again, then silence, then klang and then shoosh. Father Juan didn’t need to look to know where the boy was or what he was doing. Long ago, before he had discovered the comfort of deep prayer or meticulous study, he had learned the power of dribbling a ball and shooting at the hoop. It was as good a way to hold back grief as any he had ever known and he knew that interrupting the boy right now, no matter how well intended, would only makes things worse.

After a while he climbed the stairs, the thump, thump, thump matching pace with his heart. Once back in his small apartment, seated at the table, Father Juan was reminded of his first job as a priest. Fresh out of seminary, full of the ignorance of youth and a bit too much pride, he had inadvertently angered the

church's secretary on his second day there. For six months he received his messages late, if at all, was constantly having troubles with his paperwork, and could not seem to fit in with the church members. Worst still, the secretary refused to call him father, instead she called him by his first name. She also treated him like a message boy, sending him on the smallest of errands as if he was the church driver or janitor. He knew the source of his troubles but could not seem to fix it. He tried being polite, making subtle hints, careful suggestions, all for naught.

One night while the two of them were working late, he finally had had enough. In a fit of desperation, he laid into her like a ton of bricks; yelling at the top of his voice for a solid five minutes. Even now, some 25 years on, remembering that night still made Father Juan's face blush with embarrassment.

The very next day, Father Juan came to church sure that he was going to get a tongue lashing from his boss, the senior father. When he walked in the church's office, the secretary handed him his messages and for the first time called him "Father Juan". Surprised, he almost tripped over the door jam on the way out. After that, Father Juan never had another problem in that church. The members greeted him like he was family, the elders respected him, even asking him, a mere 22 year old, for advice and his paperwork was always on time. Two weeks after the incident, Father Juan sent the secretary, Señora Pérez, a dozen yellow roses, along with a note of apology. They had been good friends since.

In his hallway, Father Juan kept a photo of Señora Pérez and at least one member from every church he had worked. They were his angels. The ones who made his job easier, the ones who had helped a very scared orphan boy feel at home and unafraid. Some had passed on, some had been like Señora Pérez, a part of the church, some had been simple lay members; ones who came irregularly but always somehow left the church more at peace than when they arrived. One had been a fellow priest, now a bishop. One was a criminal, still in prison. All of them had helped him in some way or another and had given him more support than he knew he deserved. He touched each frame lightly, remembering their names, taking strength from their guidance. Letting a single tear fall as he remembered what was always true; he was not alone, his lord had not forsaken him.

That night, as was his habit, he prayed for all of his angels. Then he prayed for his new church, thanking God for a new chance, for a new place to meet yet another one of his better children.

## Chapter 2

*(Thursday, 10/24)*

The next morning, after his jog and a quick shower, Father Juan decided to walk to the parish to meet his new boss.

Father Juan approached the church walking North up St. Mary's street. Where that street ran into St. Joseph's Street there stood a church. The church grounds roosted as if to guarantee St. Mary's Street could not continue. "Don't even think of going further," it seemed to say. Father Juan chided himself for his dark thoughts. The looming clouds on the horizon, dark and bold for all of their distance, didn't help.

At the corner, Father Juan turned back to the south and looked back down St. Mary's Street. It was a trick he had learned sometime deep in his past; to look away from a problem, to see it in another light. He'd learned to do this so long ago that it had become a habit and action without thought.

The light here was warm and bright. The clouds had not touched the deep blue of the Texas morning sky. Here was the real place he thought, the real town. He let his eyes take in the long flat town. There was very little to break the relentless horizontal line of the earth. The houses were all short, single story affairs that rambled off to either side. They were ranch houses without the ranch. The street was almost flat with no curbs to mark its borders – only grey asphalt merging into the tan dirt and dusty grass. The yards were also flat, large, dark green lawns with only the occasional fence or bush to mark the borders between one house and the next. Holding it all together, as if to fight the relentless oppression of the horizon, were tall weeds standing in clumps here and there, their light green color and thick stems made them stand out from the flat lawns and gardens they were invading. He liked the weeds a lot. For a hundred years their territory had been overrun, smashed flat by endless houses, stepped on and eaten by cow after cow, ripped clean to make room for endless fields of alien corn and cotton. Still the tall proud weeds had yet to surrender. A man could learn a lot from these guys, Father Juan thought.

As he turned back North, the sun came out. The lone bell tower on the right face of the church lit up. Its white limestone face stood out bright from the surrounding brown brick. Two strings of perfectly round smooth holes ran vertically up the limestone, almost as if the bell tower were a giant tennis shoe

waiting to be laced up. It was the only two story structure in the town besides the converted barn he lived in. The cross on the top of the bell tower stood erect, tall, proud and firm. Here, he thought, like the weeds, was a building ready to face the endless Texan horizon, unafraid.

Whistling a happy tune, Father Juan walked under the clouds to the front door. The door was not locked which did not surprise the priest. This town was a long way from the city. People would do things differently here. Inside, he found the sanctuary empty, only his own echoes responding to his calls. In the church office he spied a purse on top of a desk stacked with neat rows of paper. He recognized these as the markings of an efficient church secretary, a woman who knew people and got things done. It was a good sign, he thought, like coming home and finding his favorite book sitting on his reading chair. "Well, if they're not here they can't be far," he said to himself.

A loud noise suddenly filled the church. It sounded to Father Juan like a fight between a shotgun and a tractor engine. So far, the shotgun sounded like it was winning. Following the noise, Father Juan walked out front and turned East towards the short flat building which must be the parsonage. Dense puffs of white smoke drifted out from around a long out building further past the parsonage. As Father Juan walked towards the smoke the sound got louder. The shotgun was losing ground, the tractor engine gaining the upper hand. On his right he passed an old Dodge station wagon parked casually under a tree, its paint covered with old dirt and dust but otherwise looking serviceable.

At the end of the out building he rounded the corner and stood at the entrance to a two car garage. The sound by now was deafening, forcing Father Juan to put his hands to his ears. The middle of the garage was dominated by a huge engine stand. Short mobile work carts were scattered to either side. The carts were piled with tools. More tools lined both side walls in neat shiny rows of chrome. The back of the garage held several rows of deep cabinets open in the middle by a small workbench. Peering through the smoke Father Juan saw a man and a woman standing near the center working on a massive engine which was bolted firmly to the engine stand. The two people were so engrossed in their work that they didn't notice Father Juan. Between the piercing engine noise and the smoke he doubted he could get their attention.

Just then the engine died. Not quickly, like a car's engine when the ignition is turned off. It sputtered and popped, back-firing with thunder. This was the source of the shot gun noise Father Juan had noticed before. Finally the engine gave a huge gasp, followed by an asthmatic wheeze and was silent. Ears still ringing Father Juan lowered his hands and watched them as the wind quickly cleared the smoke from the garage. "Well," he said loudly. "That was



impressive.”

The man and the woman turned to look at the stranger. The man was large, almost as tall as the priest, thick on the chest with a wide pale face and a scattering of thin blonde hair going to white, pushing 50, maybe 55. The woman was also tall, but thin, almost gaunt. She had thick brown hair, straight but tucked in a sensible bun. Her face was narrow, her eyes clear but lines underneath her eyes spoke of hard work, of times spent looking at things better left unsaid. She looked closer to the priest's own age, mid to late 30's. Both of them were dressed in stained and well worn coveralls, like a matched pair of auto mechanics that had been taken from a big city by a UFO and dropped out in the middle of nowhere. The pair also wore sturdy thin mechanics gloves, clear safety glasses and large padded ear protectors. The man pulled off his safety glasses and removed his ear protectors, casually setting them both down on the nearest work cart. The hair on his crown now stood up in thick tufts like the light green weeds Father Juan had seen from across the church. The resemblance brought an unplanned smile to his face.

“You must be the new priest,” said the man as he removed his gloves. “Father Jacob,” he said, indicating himself as he stretched out his hand. “And this,” he said pointing with a nod, “is Miss Hoffman, the parish secretary.”

She is more than that, thought Father Juan, as he watched the two work together like a matched pair of gloves. Father Juan had been in more than one parish where the priest and one of the lay members had an “arrangement”. More than most people, he understood the weakness of the flesh. He just hoped that this wasn't one of those kind of parishes. Not a great image to have about your new boss, he thought, forcing himself to mentally change gears, to think happier thoughts. He didn't need any more black clouds today.

The senior priest's fingers were thick and scarred, his palms huge. They were the hands of a man not afraid of hard work. By contrast, Miss Hoffman's hands were thin. The skin was stretched tight, the nails clean and short with no polish. They were the hands that belonged to the desk he had seen in the church office. No nonsense, efficient. She shook his hand like a man, with a firm grip. Father Juan added his other hand, gently enfolding her hand to help soften the greeting.

After shaking their hands, he let his hands drop, feeling tall and awkward. To distract himself from these thoughts he pointed at the large engine. “That has got to be the biggest engine I have ever seen. What is it?”

The senior priest let out a grunt. “That, son, is an Allison 1710, V12 engine. One of the most powerful engines ever built.” Father Juan nodded his head, not

knowing what to say, not wanting to appear totally ignorant. A thought came to him “Are those for a tractor or something?” he asked.

The senior priest laughed, “Or something,” he said as he patted the huge thing affectionately. “Your not much of a plane buff are you son?” The question was rhetorical. “These little beauties were the power plants behind some of the best fighters of their day. Back in double-yah, double-yah two. P-38s, P-40s, P-39s and even the first Mustang were pushed by them.”

Father Juan looked surprised. He was impressed. “Well it certainly is large,” he said. “Mind if I ask what it is doing out here?”

“Ha. Kind of a strange thing to find in a rectory, eh?” the senior priest asked. “Sure. It’s a bit of a hobby of mine. My father worked at the Allison factory in Indianapolis before the war. When he went into the army, my mother took his job. Tinkering with theses engines got to be a bit of a family hobby. Later, when I found myself a bush priest in Alaska, a family friend asked if I would help him rebuild an engine. Winters in Alaska get mighty boring between Sundays, so I took to the job with relish. Word got around and I've been doing the odd rebuild here and there ever since.”

“It's a fun hobby,” he continued with a chuckle, “and it keeps me off the streets.” The three of them shared a polite chuckle, as the senior priest continued. “Go ahead, Emily. I think we're done for the day. ” Miss Hoffman grabbed a few things, said her good-byes and headed back for the church.

After she left, the senior priest turned towards Father Juan and asked, “Speaking of finding funny things out in the North Texas weeds, what’s a rascal like you doing in a place like this?”

Father Juan felt the blood drain from his face. Father Jacob laughed and slapped him on the back, “Don't be too scared son. I'm not the kind to pry. Besides, as I learned from a wise old priest many years ago, don't look a gift horse in the mouth.” Father Jacob then set down his gloves and turned off a few machines in the garage. “Com'on to the house,” he said holding open the back door. “Why don't you get yourself a cup of coffee, while I change into my clerics.”

The back door of the garage opened into a large utility room with a washer and dryer on one side and a generous sink on the other. The senior priest pointed towards a kitchen through another door while he headed further down a hall. Father Juan could hear him yell, “There's half and half in the fridge and sugar on the counter. Cups in the cupboard. Make yourself at home.”

Father Juan found the cups, large green ones with thick sturdy handles. The

coffee pot on the counter was half full. Loading up his cup part way, he dug out the half and half and then lightened his coffee until it was a pale reflection of its former self. After he found the drawer with the spoons, a generous scoop of sugar followed. The first test slurp brought a smile to his face. Warm and sweet. Just the way he liked it.

He had just taken a seat at the small kitchen table when Father Jacob came in, dressed in black slacks and a black shirt. The stiff white Roman collar showed underneath. Father Juan was dressed the same way – formal clothes for a formal occasion. Once again Father Juan was glad for the formality of the church. A priest could go anywhere in the world, go to any parish, big or small and still expect to dress the same. The uniformity of dress, of priestly expectations, brought him great comfort.

Father Jacob poured himself a generous cup and added only half and half. After he sipped his cup, he put the creamer away and sat down opposite the new priest. Father Juan had carefully selected the chair he thought the senior father left for his guests. By the look of his new boss he knew he had guessed correctly which chair the older priest habitually used. The senior priest took a sip and set his coffee down. “Now I don't want to startle you son,” he said, “but I did look into your past a bit.”

Father Juan was not surprised. Every priest had his contacts within the church and each used them to the degree they thought they could or should. “What I found was pretty impressive,” Father Jacob continued. “You’re record says you are a good priest, compassionate and kind. The few people I talked to who actually knew you were all very clear about that. To a man or woman, they all praised your work in the church.” The priest paused to gather his thoughts. “That's good,” he continued. “Excellent. I’ve always thought the main job of the church was leading the flock and in the 30 damn years of wearing this collar, if’n you’ll pardon my French, I have yet to see anything that made me think differently.”

Father Juan began to relax. He had sat through many opening interviews with a senior priest, some of them quite horrendous. In his experience, this one was going better than most.

“All of which to say, I think you’ll fit in well with my style of leadership,” the older priest said. “I also hear,” he continued, “that you speak Mexican well.” Father Juan nodded. “Good,” he continued. “For years this was a pretty strict white's church. Oh not that the parishioners would think of such a thing but you know how Sunday mornings tend to segregate. The few Mexican believers that lived nearby were happy to go over to the next parish, or so it seemed.

Recently that has changed. They are starting to come over to Holy Family and as long as they are here, I want them to feel welcome. If that means talking to them in their own language, then that is what we'll do. Miss Hoffman has a bit of Spanish, she gets by pretty good but I never learned to speak it much. They don't exactly teach you that kind of thing back in Illinois, at least back when I was a kid." He took a sip of coffee. "So I think you'll be an asset to Holy Family. At least I would like to think so..." He let the pause stretch out – thinking some more.

"I also heard some other talk," he continued, "and not the good kind either. Your record shows you've been bounced around from parish to parish, worse than an Alaskan bush priest on his weekly rounds." Father Juan started to speak, but the senior priest held up his hand to silence him. "Let me finish, son," he continued. "A priest your age should have settled down – should have dug in some roots. You're old enough to have your own parish and have been for years. Maybe even be a senior priest." Again Father Juan tried to speak but the senior priest kept him silent. "Let me tell you, son. I'm a big believer in the grace of God. I don't know if you did anything in the past to deserve being shuffled around and I don't care. I hear that you are close friends with a well liked Bishop. Some people think he is sheltering you, protecting you from something. Now I don't know Bishop Sousa from snot but he doesn't strike me as the kind of man who would cover up for a criminal in his order, let alone befriend him – especially after the way he handled those pedophiles who besmirched the church down in Los Angeles."

This last part he said with undisguised anger in his voice. To calm himself down Father Jacob took another sip of coffee and continued, "All that I want to say son, is... ah... I don't know what is dogging you and I don't care. I also don't believe the talk I hear about curses and such. What I care about are the needs of my flock, of the spiritual and social needs of this community. Now if you think you can work with me, meet the needs of my flock, then you are as welcome here as long as you like. No questions asked. And I mean that last part."

The senior priest stopped again, took another sip. "These people are my home, my friends. After living in Alaska for so long, flying from camp to camp, I never thought in a million years I would feel at home in a dust stop town in North Texas. I was very lucky in that. Maybe you'll be lucky too. Who knows? These people have big hearts, heck, they are the closest thing to family I've ever found."

He looked up from his coffee, looking the younger priest in the eye. "But just you remember. If you do any harm to my people, may the Lord help you son because I certainly will not. Are we clear on that?"

Father Juan nodded his head, feeling a lump in his throat. “Yes Father,” he gulped out. “Crystal.”

“Good,” said the senior priest, “Cause I got a load of paperwork to manage and not enough time to do it. Ready to get going?”

“Yes,” said Father Juan.

Father Jacob set his coffee cup in the sink and headed for the door. Father Juan did the same, noticing that he hadn't had so much as a sip from the time he sat down. Setting his cup into the sink, he noticed his hands were shaking. “God, let that be the last time”, he prayed silently. It was a prayer he had said many times before.

Father Juan got up and headed down the hall, the new boss just ahead of him. For the first time he noticed that the senior father walked with a limp, favoring his left leg. I wonder how that happened, he thought. As they got to the door the senior priest turned to look back. “I think we can keep this conversation between us, Father. Does that suit you?”

“Yes,” said Father Juan. “And thank you Father Jacob. Thank you.”

## Chapter 3

Father Juan spent his first day going over the parish. He poked his head into every nook and cranny he could find – from the musty basement, which served as a polling place, to the social hall behind the sanctuary, to the upper attic which stored some unusual vestments and robes including an ancient cincture and alb; clothing from a different time. He also walked the grounds and the nearby large cemetery, noting names, getting a feel for the place.

After lunch, he got acquainted with his small cubicle, really a converted closet in the church's office. A better part of the afternoon was spent hooking up his laptop computer to the church's network and going over how Miss Hoffman liked to name her files and where she liked to save them. A surprising amount of the Church's work was pretty much like any small business. Father Juan's familiarity with other parishes made it easy for him to learn the “style” of each parish and blend in quickly. By the time he had finished his last print test and gone through most of the long familiar forms, the sun had dropped appreciably

and it was time to leave.

This first thing Father Juan did when he got home was pick up the phone. He quickly dialed a number and sat down in his reading chair with a slump. He had just finished loosening his collar, pulling hard with his finger when the phone was answered on the second ring.

Putting on a fake southern drawl the priest asked, "Pardon me, darling. Is this here where I can get me one of them there church keys?"

The voice on the other You got a girlfriend or something?"

The priest just laughed, "Hola Tia. I see you're still at the parish. Shouldn't you be home by now cooking for your husband or something?"

"That old man? You know Senior Pérez hates having me around when the boys are over."

It was an old joke between them, from back when he first had showed up at the San Bernardino parish 20 years before. Though Father Juan called Señora Pérez, "Tia", she was not his real aunt, no matter how often he wished that she was. Like most church secretaries, Señora Pérez, Patty to her friends, did most of the day-to-day work in the parish. When Father Juan was fresh out of Divinity School and sure he knew everything there was to know about everything, she had gently taken him under her wing and helped knock off most of the rough edges of youth and a hard life. Kind, giving, honest and sharp as a tack, she was in a very real sense, the mother he never had. She used to tell him every day that she thanked God for bringing him into her life. On the day he finally realized that this was not just a nice saying from her but that she sincerely meant those words, he cried for the first time in years. He left the parish not long after but the two had remained close friends since.

After a few minutes of catching up on friends and family, Señora Pérez stopped him with a question. "So do you need me to call the secretary at your new parish?"

"Tia! Do I have any secrets I can keep from you?"

"You're a smart boy, Mijo, but for all that you're also very simple. That is a good thing for a priest or a husband. It makes them easier to boss." This last part was said with a laugh. "It's been only a week or so since you moved and I know for a fact that Bishop Sousa was picked more for how he looks in front of a camera than his skills as a communicator. The membership in your parish have got to be asking themselves the same question that the members of any parish will ask themselves about their new priest. Only in your case there is usually more rumors than facts floating about and there's no one to tell them what is

true and what isn't." She paused for a moment, "Does that about sum it up?"

"Yes Tia. Except for the fact that it's my first day and I haven't met any of the parish yet, you are correct."

"See. This is why we worship Mary as well as Jesus. Every man needs a woman to keep him humble."

"Then what do women need, Tia?"

"Why nothing, Mijo," she said with a laugh. "Nothing."

This was also an old joke between them. When Father Juan was done laughing he told her about his conversation that morning with Father Jacob.

"Oh, so this group thinks you like little boys do they?"

"Well," Father Juan found himself joking, "After all, it is the latest trend in the church."

Señora Pérez laughed again. "You and your sick humor, Mijo. Listen, I'll call Father Jacob and give him the skinny. But before it gets too late, I better go home and put together our dinner. You know how grumpy your Tio gets if he doesn't eat."

"Thanks Tia. You're the best."

"Hugs and kisses, sweetie. Be a good boy. Bye-bye"

"Bye."

Father Juan leaned back into his chair and relaxed. Talking with Señora Pérez always picked him up. He let his thoughts wonder, enjoying the warmth of the sun and a few hours with nothing to do – content for the moment to just be. Then he heard the thump, thump, thump of the basketball outside and before he knew it he had shot up out of his chair and was busily changing into his workout clothes – shorts and a T-shirt with slightly longer sleeves. After all, he thought to himself, being a priest was just a calling, but basketball. Now that was life. He grabbed his ball and headed out the door.

The room that Father Juan rented was at one end of a large barn – the only two story structure that Father Juan had seen in the whole town, not counting the church. On the other end of the barn was a packed dirt opening that covered the area between the barn and the house. Father Juan would have called it a courtyard but here in Texas he assumed it would have a different

name. There were no borders to it, like a lot of the yards in town. The hard dirt gradually faded into the surrounding lawn. On the face of the barn, over the main door, rusted on its long metal track was a basketball backboard and hoop. It leaned slightly to one side and looked to be a few inches short of the 10 foot regulation height but it was a basketball hoop. In some of the more rural parts of Mexico, Father Juan had had to make do with a stiff wicker basket on a tree branch. Compared to that, this was a luxury.

Someone had traced a key, the large circle and two straight lines that properly faced a basketball hoop into the dirt with their shoe. The long curve of a 3 point line arced behind it. A ball was left sitting on the ground under the hoop but there was no one around . Using his own ball, Father Juan dribbled to the free-throw line, set up and shot. The ball arced high into the air, and dropped in smoothly through the hoop with a swoosh. He picked up the ball and shot again, this time from the right elbow; the point where the right hand side of the circle met with the free-throw line. This time the ball bounced off the backboard, spun around the rim and then rolled over the edge – a spinner. Father Juan chased the errant ball down and shot again from the same point. He kept this up until he could shoot cleanly from every point in the key. Then he started with lay-ups. Dribbling from the right, well beyond the 3-point line, he dribbled the ball in, jumped and placed it gently against the backboard. Momentum carried the ball off the board and down into the hoop. He switched to his off side, doing a lay-up from the left, then repeated the same procedure with different shots; crossing under the rim and throwing backwards; stopping quickly and jumping both upwards and backwards; even charging straight up and slam-dunking over the front. In very little time he was covered with sweat and was grinning ear to ear. He was so focused that he didn't hear the boy until he spoke.

“Nice shot.”

The priest had just done a shot from almost out at the 3 point line. The boy's voice startled him enough that he let the ball bounce by. He turned to look, saw it was the boy, and smiled. “I noticed you came out here a lot. I hope you don't mind if I used your space while you were at school.”

The boy shrugged as if to say, why would I care? He was dressed in long pants and a long sleeve shirt – both dark and well cared for. On his feet he had dark leather shoes, the kind that Father Juan used to see when he was young. Kids dressed for school the way adults dressed for work. It had been a while since he had seen someone dress with that kind of respect for school. It spoke volumes to the priest about the boy's parents – parent, he corrected himself.



The boy looked away for a moment, thinking. Father Juan waited. Some questions were worth the wait. Eventually the boy turned back to the priest. "I thought you were supposed to wear one of those collar thingys all the time," he said. "You know, the funny white ones that go around your throat."

Father Juan involuntarily brought his hand up to his neck and laughed. "Not always," he said. "We only wear those when trying to scare the natives. Besides, they get in the way of my sky-hook." So saying, Father Juan deftly jumped with the ball and brought his outside arm up over his head. The ball curved up and over smoothly and dropped on the rim. The bounce took it over, but just barely.

"Wow," said the boy. "Where'd you learn that? That is a nice shot."

"The Sky-hook? Man where I grew up every boy could do a sky-hook. Had to. It was Kareem Abdul Jabbar's signature shot and Kareem was 'the man', you know what I mean. You show up at the court without one, you weren't a serious player. Course, now a-days one probably has to have a slam dunk or an outside shot to be a player. I don't know."

The boy stood there. Watching, not speaking. Not moving. The priest retrieved the ball and without thinking shot a bounce pass to the boy. He caught it off the bounce, easily, almost lazily with one hand and then, as if realizing what he had done, let the ball drop. "Can you play?" Father Juan asked. The boy stood there. The ball bouncing lower and lower. "I know you can shoot," the priest continued. "I can hear it when you practice but can you play?"

"Um, I guess so," the boy said quietly. "I don't know. I only practice by myself."

"Well then grab your shorts and your shoes," said the priest. "We'll see what we can see."

The second Sunday after Father Juan had moved in, happened to fall on Halloween. The Mass was lightly attended, especially in the evening as family's rushed home to trick-or-treat. Father Juan had picked up some candy but his apartment was so far off the road that only a few children braved the dark to reach it. He greeted them in his full black clerics, including rabat vest, jacket and Roman collar. Without exception every child thought it was a costume.

The following morning was bright with warm sunlight streaking into his window. Father Juan got up and dressed in his running gear. An avid jogger, Father Juan looked forward to exploring his neighborhood on foot, a trick he had learned long ago that seemed to help him put together the community around him. He whistled through his small breakfast, said his morning prayers and grabbed his keys, tying them to his shoe rather than holding them in a pocket. Just as he was leaving he casually looked to his left as he came down the stairs. On the north side of the building he saw a few candles and a small figure of a skeleton about eight inches tall. Only her face and her hands were visible. The rest of her was covered in a long wedding dress, a red one. She was adorned with coins, both Mexican and American. In one hand she held a globe, in the other a scale. A wedding or engagement ring, one large enough to fit a human hand, was held around her neck by a string. On either side of her were candles. Most of them votives, burned down to the bottom. One of two were still lit, which Father Juan quickly extinguished.

Without a word, he started his run, his thoughts going dark. I've been here less than two weeks, he thought to himself and already it was starting. Two weeks.

Not long into his run a single cloud blocks the sun. By noon the sky is covered in dark thick clouds. Before nightfall it begins to rain large warm drops.

## Chapter 4

*(Sunday, Monday, 11/7-8)*

That Sunday, the third since he had moved to Nazareth, Father Juan finally felt like the service went well. In between the homily and choir singing, the priest happened to glance towards the back of the church. He wasn't sure but he thought he saw new faces. The brown wide faces with heavy cheek bones and round heads that told of Indian blood. They contrasted sharply with the tall, thin, white faces of the mostly German immigrants that made up the body of the church and the town. The newer, darker immigrants would feel slightly out of place in such a church. They would sit in the back and be overly self-conscious. It would take them some time to feel welcome enough to be as boisterous and colorful in church as they were in their homes.

By the time the service was over, and Father Juan could make his way to the back of the church, the new faces were gone. Leaving him to wonder if they had really been there, or if they were something he had made up – a trick of the mind. He recognized that his need to be useful, to serve others in the church, could sometimes lead him to great mental leaps but he didn't think he was to the point of hallucinating new congregants at least not yet. Chuckling at his own fears, he shook hands with the people as they left the church and then after standing and talking with the hangers-on, he made his way back inside to clean up.

It was only later, as he was passing the side-altar, that he realized there might be another reason for the Latino worshipers to leave early – fear. On his knees he looked up to the Madonna with her face so serene. “Already?” he asked quietly. “Must it start so soon?” There was no answer.

Each church has its own way of doing things, its way to meet the needs of its flock. Part of moving to a new church was learning to hear those subtle rhythms and follow them. It was easy to assume that the way things were done at another church was the *only* correct way. A good priest knew when to push for new ideas, and when to respect the old ones. Father Juan was a good priest.

That night he made it home and fell into bed exhausted. The emotional strain of suddenly joining a new group of strangers was tiring. Trying to connect in his mind all the people, to put them in some kind of order, some kind of flow chart was demanding. He also had to be careful of what he said and how he acted. Even the most innocent of conversations can cause some parishioners to be angry. Worse still, Father Juan didn't know who wielded political power here. Some members he could anger with little or no consequence but others would use their anger to cause all kinds of mischief. Every church he had worked in had been this way. There were always a few squeaky wheels one didn't mess with. Alas, they didn't wear name tags when you first met them, he thought wryly. More than once he had had to find out the hard way whom they were.

The following Monday, Father Juan got up early, dressed and started his morning run. The town of Nazareth was a bit too small to comfortably jog. He kept having to run 2-3 loops past the same houses and the number of dogs unleashed and unfenced tended to make him slow down, stopping and letting them sniff him carefully until they got to know him. The night before he had used a satellite map of the town on his computer to determine a better route and soon found himself running along field after field of cotton and corn. The crops looked dry and disheveled to his eye but he was born and raised in the city. His knowledge of growing things was limited to tending the family's small garden as a child. He knew next to nothing about what a farmer would grow in

Texas in autumn and so reminded himself not to make judgments based upon his own ignorance. The occasional distant farmer or car was all he had for company as he let mile after mile stretch out. The school buses were just finishing their runs into town when he made it back to his small apartment. After a shower and shave he felt relaxed, ready and happy. Whistling one of his favorite choir tunes he walked the few blocks to the church.

When he got there he noticed that there was an extra car in the parking lot, a new looking red Ford Expedition. Walking in the back door he was greeted by a man who was of average height with thinning blonde hair and wearing a suit. The man stuck out his hand almost immediately and said, “Hi there, Padre. The name's Paul. Paul Doyle. But most folks around here call me coach.”

Paul Doyle was powerfully built with thick strong hands. The collar on his shirt was tight around his neck, giving him a pinched look but his smile was large and friendly. In his hands were various papers, a tape measure and a couple of pencils which he put aside to shake Father Juan's hand.

“Hello, coach,” said Father Juan. “With a greeting like that, you must be a Texan.”

Paul smiled. “Actually, I'm from California, just like yourself, Padre. I've just been here long enough to speak like a native.”

Both men laughed at this. Father Juan carefully removed his hand from Paul's crushing grip and looked about the room. Tables and chairs had been moved around as if the church was in the process of moving. Father Juan had only been working here about a month but even then the disarray in the fellowship hall felt uncomfortable to him, like a loose tooth in his mouth.

His face must have betrayed his feelings because Paul quickly added, “Don't worry about the room, Padre. We'll have it back in order in no time. I'm just moving things around so I can measure for the wedding – trying to plan the best way to fit the 40 to 50 people expected at the reception into such a tiny space.”

The back of the church behind the sanctuary was a fairly large reception area called the fellowship hall. Every Sunday it was used for a light meal after the evening Mass. The room easily held 50 people each week with a bit of room to spare. Fitting so small a wedding reception should be a snap but Father Juan didn't say this. He knew that weddings were a trying time for most families and that the people involved would express their anxiety in funny ways.

“So, are you the father of the bride?” Father Juan asked, thinking that the man was making himself useful here to hide his worry over losing a daughter.

Paul burst out a grunt that must have been heard all the way into the sanctuary. "Oh, no," he said. "I'm just the guy making sure my boss' daughter is happy."

Father Juan nodded in sympathy and was about to ask who his boss was when Miss Hoffman called over from the doorway to the sanctuary. "There you are, Father Juan. I've been looking for you."

Both men looked up. "Good morning, Miss Hoffman," Father Juan said. "How can I help you?"

She waived her hand, holding up a manila file folder. "There're some questions about the parish general fund I wanted to ask you about. Do you mind?"

Father Juan turned to Paul and said, "Excuse me, coach."

"Don't worry, Padre," he said in reply. "She does that to me all the time."

Feeling slightly bemused, Father Juan walked into the sanctuary and then to the parish office where he found Miss Hoffman seated at her desk.

"Well he seems like a nice fellow," Father Juan said by way of a greeting.

"Paul?" Emily asked. "Sure."

"You don't agree?" the priest asked.

"I don't agree right now," Emily responded.

"I see," said Father Juan, clearly indicating he did not see.

"I'm sorry, Father Juan, but when Paul gets all worked up he's a bit of a pain to be around. He came here this morning all worried about the reception for Lucy's wedding..."

"Lucy," Father Juan asked?

"Lucy Alvarez," she responded as if the name itself should be all he needed to know. When he didn't respond she added, "Probably the richest girl in Nazareth. The whole town has been talking about the wedding for months."

"It has?" Father Juan replied with acid in his tone. He was about to add a smart ass response when he thought better of it. Taking a deep breath he let out a sigh. "Forgive me, Miss Hoffman," he said in an even voice. "Pretend I am new here and don't know the town well enough to know Lucy Alvarez from, ah, Lucile Ball."

Emily looked up from her desk and her face turned red as she realized her mistake. "I just did it again, didn't I?"

It was a rhetorical question. Father Juan didn't respond. He had never seen

Miss Hoffman so agitated, She struck him as pretty evenly balanced, yet he had enough practice dealing with people to know that whatever had upset the church secretary, he himself was not the cause. This left only one other possible source.

“I take it you know him well,” he asked?

“Who? Paul?”

“Yes.”

“You could say that. He’s my boyfriend.”

“Ah,” said Father Juan, understanding dawning. “So, he doesn’t normally hang out at the parish and move things around?”

Emily let out a short staccato laugh and then a sigh. “Is it that obvious?”

“Sometimes being the new guy gives one perspective, ” Father Juan said by way of reply. “You would not be the first person I met who became uncomfortable when a loved one entered their, ah, professional space.”

Emily looked thoughtful for a moment and then glanced back at the priest. “I suppose not,” she said sheepishly.

Father Juan waited a moment and then asked, “What was it about the parish budget you wanted to know?”

“Oh, that,” Emily said. “Nothing. That was just an excuse. I was angry because Paul was messing up the fellowship hall. That is so like him. ‘Anything worth doing is worth over-doing’, or so he says. He tries so hard to fit in that it drives people away. I keep telling him, but...” She stopped mid sentence. “I’m sorry. You don’t need to hear this.”

“Apparently I do,” said the priest.

Emily laughed. “I guess I just needed to vent and you were handy.”

“I see,” said the priest. “Well do you still need to vent,” he said with some warmth?

Emily shook her head, with a rueful grin. “You’re not going to offer some advice on relationships?”

“Me?” Now it was Father Juan’s turn to laugh. “You’re asking a celibate about romantic relationships? Let’s just say it’s not exactly an area we priests have a lot of practice in,” he added with a smile.

“Hmm,” she said. “You know, I never thought of that?”

“Well,” said Father Juan, “then I guess I’m good for something around here.

Look, I've got a few things to do and I haven't had my second cup of coffee yet. Can I get you one?"

"Could you," Emily asked? Her tone was almost forlorn. "I'm afraid if I have to go back past the hall, I'm going to strangle that man."

Father Juan laughed. "Well, *that* would be awkward."

They shared a laugh as Father Juan walked back to the kitchen.

That afternoon Father Juan finished up some of his paperwork and headed out into the sanctuary to stretch. He found Father Jacob seated in the back pew with a pile of paperwork in his hands. As he approached Father Jacob looked up, "Oh there you are. I was wondering if you could take a break." Father Juan stopped and waited quietly, not knowing how to take this statement.

"I've got a favor to ask," Father Jacob continued.

Father Juan felt relieved. "Sure," he said. "How can I help?"

"You probably know this already but there's a wedding here on Saturday. I'd like you to attend. More than that, I'd like you to officiate if you could?"

"Well," said Father Juan guardedly. "I don't know if that is such a good idea."

Father Jacob looked up at him sharply. After a moment he patted the pew next to him. "Have a seat," he said. Father Juan sat down.

"Look, I know I promised not to pester you about your past," the senior priest said, "but I also know there are a lot of Mexicans, um I mean Hispanics living in this area. Regardless of what you or I have been through, they need a place of worship – a place where they will feel welcome." He paused for a moment and then continued. "I know I've mentioned this before but I was hoping that your presence here would be a help. I hoped that we could use you to reach out to these people and let them know that Holy Family welcomes them."

Father Juan looked down at his hands, a chalky taste in his mouth.

"Look, I know you've had it rough," Father Jacob continued, "and the church hasn't always worked well for you but I could really use your help and so could they. I have some big plans for this parish. I'd really like to meet the needs of all of our community but I don't want to commit the church unless I'm sure of your

support. Can I count on your help?”

Father Juan looked up from his hands and stared the senior priest in the eyes. “I’ll try my hardest to help, Father, but there are some things about the Mexican Catholics you may not be aware...”

“Exactly,” said the senior priest with enthusiasm. “There must be hundreds of things I don’t know. My Spanish is pretty limited and it just drives me nuts to know there are people out there who need the Church’s help but I’m not able to. Why did you notice the number of Mexicans coming to Mass has already doubled?”

“No I hadn’t,” said Father Juan.

“Well of course you wouldn’t,” continued Father Jacob. “You’ve only been here a month. But just you wait. You’ll see.”

“But Father...” Father Juan started to say when he was interrupted by the sound of a throat being cleared.

“Ah, hummm.”

Both priests looked up to see Paul Doyle in the doorway from the sanctuary to the hall. “Well that should do it,” he said as if nothing had happened. “I’m done for the day. I think I got it all.” He held up a clipboard with lots of notes and figures written in a neat hand.

Father Jacob said, “Great, Mr. Doyle. Did you get all the measurements you needed this time?”

“Sure thing, Father Jacob. I’m so sorry I had to bother you again.”

“It’s no problem, son,” said Father Jacob. “We’re just glad to help. Speaking of which,” Father Jacob continued, “I was just talking with Father Juan here about the wedding. What would you think about having him do the service instead of me? I’m pretty sure he could do all the Spanish parts without a translator...”

Father Jacob glanced over at Father Juan and raised an eyebrow. Father Juan nodded his head while his gut twisted.

“...and he probably knows more about Mexican weddings than you and I put together. What do you think?”

Paul looked thoughtful for a moment. “Hmm,” he said. “What an excellent idea, Father. I’ll have to ask my boss but I’m sure he’ll say yes. In fact I bet he’ll love the idea.”

“Then it’s settled,” Father Jacob beamed while Paul smiled. Father Juan sat quietly and waited. He knew enough to not try and interfere. It only made things



worse.

“Well, I better head off,” Paul said. “I’ve got a game tomorrow so I want to push them a little harder today in practice.”

Father Jacob said, “Well I have to go as well, what do you say I walk you to your car?” With that, Father Jacob got up and joined Paul in the doorway.

“Good bye, Father Juan,” Paul said. “It was nice meeting you.”

“Good bye coach,” Father Juan replied. “Good luck with the game.”

Father Jacob turned back after Paul has started to walk away Keeping his voice low, he said, “Its nice to have you on board, Father Juan. I have a feeling this is going to turn out well for all of us.”

“God willing,” said Father Juan.

“Yes,” said the senior pastor. “God willing.”

Father Jacob hurried to catch up with Paul Doyle and soon the sanctuary was quiet again. Father Juan got up and walked over to the Madonna at the side altar. He got down on his knees and prayed.

## Chapter 5

*(Tuesday, 11/9)*

The next night Father Juan picked up his phone and dialed a number from memory. It was picked up after the third ring.

“Hello?” said the female voice.

“Hola Tia,” said Father Juan.

“Mijo! ¿Como esta?”

“Bien, bien,” Father Juan replied. “You guys watching the game?”

“Your Tio has it on but I was busy in the kitchen.”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt. Would you like me to call back?”

“Don’t be silly, Mijo. You never interrupt. Besides I have the game on in the corner while I’m making tamales for the church.

“Tio isn’t making them with you?” Father Juan said in surprise. His uncle’s tamales were famous throughout the church and beyond. Everyone who tasted them said he should go into business for himself but he always responded, “I hate my boss. Why would I want to *be* him?” He always said this with a smile to show he was joking but it usually stopped people from asking him again. Still he loved to make them, usually in huge batches and freely gave them away by the panful.

“Oh no,” his aunt said. “He has the second shift after the game. The kitchen TV is too small for him he says.”

“Ah,” said Father Juan. “That sounds like the Senior Pérez I know.”

“The man is consistent,” she replied.

Father Juan could hear the sound of pots being stirred in the background.

“Perhaps I should call at another time,” he said after a long break.

“Pfft,” said his aunt. “What is it with you men? You called me to talk, so talk already.”

Father Juan could picture her standing over the stove, holding a wooden spoon and waving it as she talked to add emphasis. He’d seen her do this thousands of times. In spite of his worries, it made him smile.

“Father Jacob,” he started, “you know, the senior father at our parish? Well he asked me to officiate at a wedding this weekend.”

“That’s great, Mijo,” she said with enthusiasm.

“He also wants me to start reaching out to the Latinos in the area – make them feel welcome in the parish.”

“Even better,” she said. “As I recall, you do have some skills in that area.”

Father Juan was silent. He could hear his aunt stirring another pot.

“You’re not talking,” she said, “so there must be something else.”

“Well,” said Father Juan, “I’ve seen several new families in the church since I started. But I also noticed that they don’t stay to talk after the Mass.”

“So you think they’re being shy?” she asked.

“That, or afraid,” he answered.

“Oh,” she said. “Oh!”

“Exactly.”

“Do you think they know already?”

“That’s the thing, I don’t know.”

“Well,” she said. “I see your problem here. You want to help but you don’t know if your help would be, ah, appreciated.”

“That’s putting it nicely,” said the priest.

“Hmm,” she said with obvious concern “I don’t know how to help you here. Do you want me to call the parish secretary again? Miss... Miss...”

“Miss Hoffman And no, I don’t think that would help. Thanks for the offer Tia but I think this is one I’ll have to face on my own.”

“So now you don’t want my help,” she said sarcastically.

“Don’t be silly, Tia. You know I would never have made it as a priest without you.”

“That’s right,” she said with obvious relish. “And don’t you forget about it.”

“I never forget the advice of my grey-haired elders.”

“Grey haired! Elders! You calling me old now?”

“Never!” Father Juan replied with mock indignity. “I would *never* say such a thing to such a young, wise, and vibrant lady.”

“Humph,” she said. “I know there’s an insult in there somewhere and as soon as I find out what it is, I’m going to take my wooden spoon to your backside.”

“All the way from Southern California? You must have long arms.”

“No Mijo. Just a long memory. Is there something else I can do for you?”

“No Tia. Thanks for listening. I just needed to tell someone.”

“That’s my job. The priest whisperer.”

They both shared a laugh.

“Tell Tio I said hello but *after* the game is over.”

“I will, Mijo. Take care of yourself.”

“Hey. Do you think the Lakers have a chance against the Nuggets tonight?”

She paused for a moment. “They’re only up by four and it’s ten minutes to the half. Plenty of time. Why do you ask?”

“Well, because they got hammered three times out of four last year.”

“Doubter. That was last year. Besides, Denver can’t play when it counts. Look at their post-season record.”

“But they didn’t make the play-offs last year.”

“Exactly.”

“Dang, I should know better than talk basketball with you.”

His aunt gave a chuckle. “Take care of yourself, Mijo.”

“And you as well, Tia.”

“Bye-bye, sweetie.”

“Bye.”

Father Juan set down his phone and smiled. As always, talking to his aunt helped him get some valuable perspective. Her lack of concern gave him pause. Maybe I’m just being paranoid again he thought. Well, he said to himself, I don't know what I’m going to tell Father Jacob but I know I’m going to try and sometimes that’s all a man could do.

*(Thursday, 11/11)*

The last two days were a blur for Father Juan. Men kept coming over to the Church to drop off stuff, put up decorations or just to shoot the breeze. Father Juan met with Paul Doyle several times going over the ceremony, trying to find out how much of it should be in Spanish and how much in English. It had been a while since Father Juan had done a wedding ceremony in Spanish, so he spent his free time polishing up on his more formal speech, rubbing off the rough sounds he had picked up from the barrio.

From their time together Father Juan learned that “coach” Doyle was an avid basketball fan of the Sacramento Kings. He also found out he worked part time for Alvarez Trucking, a transportation firm on the outskirts of town. His boss, Antonio Alvarez was fairly wealthy and contributed heavily to Holy Family. The normally reserved townspeople seemed to have taken to Alvarez and his name was spoken with respect by everyone Father Juan met. This, more than anything else, gave him a sense of hope. Father Juan had been in many communities where a careful color barrier was in place, usually from both sides. It gave him hope that the practical farmers were more interested in the measure of a man than the color of his skin. In Father Juan’s experience, big city folk are often not so kind.

So it was with some surprise when Father Jacob called him into his office on

Thursday. Father Juan had waived at coach Doyle when he came into the church office, a common enough occurrence that week but didn't notice when the coach had gone straight into the senior father's office and closed the door. It was only when Father Jacob asked him to come inside and he saw coach Doyle sitting in the other chair, hands in his lap, looking awkward, and facing away from him, that he knew something was up.

Father Jacob was just starting to sit down and say something comforting when Father Juan could no longer stand it and let part of what he called his inner gang-banger slip through. "Just spill it," he said his tone sharp and hard. "I know something's up and I hate being sugar coated."

Coach Doyle looked suitably embarrassed but Father Jacob only raised an eyebrow. "Fair enough," said the senior priest. "The Alvarez's have asked that I do the ceremony this weekend instead of yourself."

Father Juan could feel the heat rise onto his cheeks but he squashed down any response. He felt bad enough about his first outburst in front of both his boss and a man he was starting to think of as a friend. He wasn't going to make that mistake twice, no matter how hot-headed he felt.

Father Jacob looked into his eyes and continued. "Antonio Alvarez called me himself to apologize for any hard feelings and expressed nothing but admiration for what you have done to help his daughter's wedding." He paused to see how the words were affecting the junior priest. Noting the reaction, he continued. "I was told the reason they wanted to use me, instead of you, was a fondness his daughter has for me. Apparently she said she wanted the priest who christened her to be the one to marry her."

Father Juan felt the knot in his gut uncoil. He let out a soft sigh and slumped slightly in his chair. "I understand completely," he said with a level tone. "I don't know much about the rest of the parish but I do know Mexican Catholics and they're about as sentimental as they come. Besides making the bride happy is pretty much what the day is about, eh Father? Well that and avoiding the mother of the bride."

All three men started to chuckle, breaking the tension. Coach Doyle slapped Father Juan on the thigh and said, "Dang, I was worried you were going to blow a gasket over this, knowing how you Laker fans handle disappoint so poorly."

Father Juan shot back with a grin, "I guess we just don't have as much practice at disappointment as you King's fans."

When the laughter had died down Father Jacob spoke up in a quiet tone. "So you're really not upset, Father?"

Father Juan looked back and said, "To be honest, Father, I think I'm relieved. Yours are some pretty big shoes to fill and much as I try, I really do not know the parish like you do. Yet."

"Good, good," the senior priest said as the men shoved their chairs back and got up. "I'm glad that is all settled."

Coach Doyle and Father Juan started heading for the door when Father Jacob called back the priest. "Uh, one more thing, Father Juan," he said.

"I'll catch you later," coach Doyle shouted as he wandered into the office. "Besides I think I'll talk to this pretty little lady right here," he said as he sat down next to Emily.

Father Juan stepped back into the office and placed his hand on the door, looking back at Father Jacob.

"Go ahead and leave the door open," the senior priest said. "This isn't any big deal."

Father Juan got settled in his seat, saying, "Shoot," to Father Jacob.

"There's one more thing Antonio Alvarez asked me to convey. He asked if you would come to the wedding. No, that's not right. What he said was *he would be honored* if you came to the wedding. Only it was more like he insisted you come, if you get my point. But, he requested that you come, not in your clerics but in your civvies."

"That's a pretty odd request, Father," said Father Juan. "Not that I mind a day out of my dog collar," he said using a popular inside term for the Roman collar most priests wore, "but it does sound kind of funny. Did he give you a reason for this, ah request?"

"Actually," said the senior father, "he did. He told me some long joke about peacocks and what-not but what it boils down to is that he felt there should only be one man with the authority to marry his daughter at her wedding. Something about too many chiefs and not enough Indians or something like that. He had some Spanish words he used but I'm afraid they escaped me. You know how poor my Spanish is."

Father Juan chuckled at this. Father Jacob had one of the worst Spanish accents he had ever heard. He often would say things in Spanish in front of Father Juan and Miss Hoffman just to watch them laugh.

"Hmm," said Father Juan. "I don't mind so much but I'm curious what you make of this, Father?"

"Well," said Father Jacob. "I know it's unusual but at the same time it does

make some sense. I don't think it's a real imposition to you nor do I think that it directly disrespects your authority or at least was not intended to disrespect your authority. On the other hand, if you are uncomfortable with this, I'll back you 100%. He did make it clear it was a request, not a demand and even though he is a big contributor to the parish and is well respected around town, if you want to wear your dog collar, then I don't have a problem with it. Does that help?"

"Very much so, yes," said Father Juan pausing in thought.

"Well?" said Father Jacob, after a moment.

"Oh," said Father Juan. "Tell him I will be delighted to attend his daughter's wedding. Dressed as... dressed as..." He paused for a second, putting his hand on his chin. "You know, Father, I just realized I don't have a civilian suit." He held out his arms to emphasize his long lanky frame. "And at my size. I don't think there'll be a suit jacket in town I can borrow. Maybe my cleric jacket will do. But that sill leaves me with.... Hold on a second."

Father Juan got up quickly and stuck his head around the door. "Yo coach," he yelled into the outer office.

"What's up, L.A.?" coach Doyle shouted back.

"You got a tie I can borrow. I'm going to a wedding."

## Chapter 6

*(Saturday, 11/13)*

That Saturday, the second one in November, was unseasonably warm. Warm enough that the reception was moved outside by the bride after waking up and seeing how beautiful the day was. It proved to be an excellent decision as the trees near the church still had some of their leaves and the air smelled soft and warm, like the rich earthy smell of the soil plowed on a sunny day.

Father Juan found himself in a funny position. As a new priest with darker skin, he had always felt removed from the rest of the congregation. On this day though, the roles were reversed, like some kind of cosmic backwards day. Not only was he in the majority as he sat in the back and saw the pews full of

smiling colorful people with dark skin like his own but because he was not wearing his clerics and most of the people did not know him, he was treated exactly like everyone else. It was an unusual sensation for Father Juan and he enjoyed it immensely. At one point he even had a young lady corner him and make it abundantly clear she thought he would make an excellent husband. Fortunately he was rescued from that predicament by Father Jacob who just happened to spy the poor priest and excused him from the lady by asking him to help in the kitchen.

This proved to be a wise decision. One of the ladies from the parish, Mrs. Kiem, was attempting to maintain order in the kitchen. Her methodical and meticulous directions were so stereotypically German that Father Juan had to fight to keep from laughing. Unfortunately, they were also completely at odds with the ladies now in the kitchen. The Latina ladies were using the tried and true technique of pretending to misunderstand. Mrs. Kiem's English so they could do what they wanted. Sensing a pending explosion, Father Juan promised to act as a go-between and then pointed out to Mrs. Kiem that the guys setting up tables out back were having some difficulties. In a rush, she was out the door. The ladies in the kitchen had a laugh at this until Father Juan politely reminded them in Spanish that this was not their home where they could rule anyway they liked. This was a House of God and all of them here, including himself were its guests. After that, the equipment in the kitchen was treated with a bit more respect.

The smells and the familiar Spanish in the kitchen had taken Father Juan back to the early days in his youth – hanging out in the kitchen with his sisters and aunts, trying to pilfer sweets and enjoying the undivided attention that adoring older women place upon precocious boys in every culture. A deep yet happy nostalgia washed over him and the next thing he knew he found himself washing dishes and sharing gossip, just like the rest.

Sometime after the ceremony Father Jacob had introduced Father Juan to Antonio Alvarez. The man was not tall but had an imposing presence. He moved with a sense of ownership as if the room and everything in it belonged to him. Which, Father Juan noted to himself was rather ironically close to the truth.

Alvarez wore a white suit that fit him impeccably. He also owned a white hat, a fedora that looked to be from the 30s and was as unlike the surrounding cowboy hats, as a hawk would be in a room full of doves. He wore this outfit with grace and charm, loosely like a second skin. Father Juan also noticed that the surrounding crowd treated him with respect. Always polite to him and careful to say hello or shake his hand. The man's hands were not large yet when Alvarez shook Father Juan's hand the priest got the uncanny impression he was



touching royalty. The men chatted for a moment, Alvarez again thanking Father Juan for understanding his daughter's wishes and Father Juan told him that truthfully he was enjoying being incognito. They shared a laugh at this and then moved on.

The rest of the Alvarez family was a little hard to figure out. There were so many cousins, aunts and uncles that at some point Father Juan gave up trying to count. There seemed to be a large group living south of the border that had come up for the wedding. They spoke Spanish with a little less polish, better than what Father Juan had learned growing up but still noticeable as being Mexican rather than Norte Americano.

The only exception to this was Alvarez's wife, Lupé. Lupé was beautiful in a way that almost shocked Father Juan. She had long thick dark hair, a slender build and a face so perfect, so uniform, it was difficult to look at without staring which Father Juan caught himself doing several times during the day. He was unused to feelings of attraction towards women, to this kind of sexual tension and found the experience both interesting and disturbing. It was only when he noticed the rest of the men equally besotted, especially Father Jacob, that he didn't feel so guilty. The woman was genuinely attractive, through and through. She was also a very loving and kind person which he was to discover later.

After dinner was served, Father Juan took a break from the kitchen to sit down and eat. He spied an empty space near the back of the lot by the parish cemetery and away from the main crowd. He arrived there to find himself seated next to a man with a grey sport coat and a friendly but aloof smile.

Just as he sat down he noticed something, a flash of light off towards the cemetery. In between the leaves from the trees he could just make out a woman, an old woman. From her small size and the sharpness of her cheekbones, evident even at this distance, he assumed she had been born in the more distant parts of Mexico where the twins of poverty, malnutrition and hard work, made for short bent-backed people. He had seen many such ladies around the barrio where he grew up. Always they were the grandmothers of sons or daughters made relatively rich by the move to America with their hard work. Such little grandmothers were treated like delicate birds and respected for their tough wisdom. The harsh mountains and deserts of Northern Mexico were a brutal place to live – even the survivors from that area were often marked for life.

Quickly as he has seen the old woman, she was gone. Father Juan was left with the disturbing feeling she had been staring at him all the while. "Did you see that?" he asked out loud.

“¿Que?” The man sitting next to him said.

“That woman,” Father Juan said, switching to Spanish, “over by the cemetery. One of the little grandmothers, an Indio; an Indio from deep in the Sierra Madres.”

The man seated next to him looked at Father Juan more closely. Seeing the suit, tie and hearing the rustic Spanish he asked, “Do you mind me asking just what is it exactly that you do?”

Without looking away from the spot where he had seen the woman, Father Juan said, “Pray.” When the man didn’t respond, Father Juan spared him a glance and saw he had one eyebrow raised in question. “Pray and fill out paperwork,” he continued. “I’m a priest for his Lord’s most Holy Catholic Church. In fact, this is my parish.”

“Ah,” said the man with relief. “That’s a good one.”

Father Juan looked at the man again, this time more closely. He was of medium size, maybe five foot ten. He carried the fat of a contented man – his suit bulging slightly at the neck, arm pits and waist. Thick haired, round faced, brown eyed, the man looked to be in his early 40s. Maybe older. The Indian blood made plain in his harsh cheek bones and plump hands. His eyes were sharp, cunning, confident. He noticed everything, spoke little. He wore his small pot belly the way some women wore their sunglasses – using the girth of a lazy man to conceal the ambitious one within.

“And yourself,” Father Juan asked? “What is it you do?”

The man smiled at Father Juan. “Normally I like to say something glib but I like your description better, amigo. I’m a cop. A homicide lieutenant in Amarillo. But what I *do* is pray. Pray and fill out paperwork.”

Both men laughed at this. Father Juan then held out his hand. “Father Juan,” he said.

“Marco. Marco Dellrosa,” the cop responded as they shook hands.

Just then two boys came running up and hugged Marco. “Papa, papa,” they cried, and Father Juan laughed in delight as they pestered their dad with stories of all the people they saw and the candy they got. The older cop clearly loved the attention.

Soon afterwards the boys’ mother appeared and after politely introducing herself to Father Juan, let her husband know it was time to go home. The small family trundled off to the parking lot where a lot of the other celebrants were headed. Father Juan made one last check on the church and after putting a few

things away, made his own way home.

## Chapter 7

*(Sunday, 11/14)*

The Sunday, after the wedding, hit Father Juan pretty hard. After feeling so much a part of the parish, the return to the more formal and stiff methods of worship on Sunday made him feel all the more like the new kid in school. Part of this, he reminded himself, was that he was still getting to know the parish, getting a handle on its people. Bits and pieces started to fit in place though. For instance, he now knew that Mrs. Keim was the center of the gossips for the predominantly German Catholic population and he was all the more careful to treat her with respect. She was kind in her own way and loved her church fiercely but the spark in her eye and the slight downturn on the edges of her smile, warned Father Juan of a harsh and inflexible interior. Having been on the bad side of more than one gossip, Father Juan was careful to not make that mistake again. The call of Jesus, he liked to remind himself, was not for perfection but love. That some people were easier to love than others did not change his calling one iota. Again, his habit of politeness helped him along. How he felt about someone could always be sorted out later, in prayer. How he acted towards someone was a different matter.

The rest of the service seemed in some way to mirror Mrs. Keim. It seemed cold, methodical, unemotional and controlled. Even the singing seemed slow and tuneless to his ear. Father Juan new better than to trust his feelings at the moment and remembered he had dealt with these feelings before. They happened almost every time he moved to a new parish. He knew some of it must be resentment at being forced to move yet again and he chided himself for such weakness. To compensate, after the service, he made a special point to thank Mrs. Keim for her help in the kitchen yesterday at the wedding and then made sure to introduce himself to two other people.

*(Wednesday, 11/17)*

That Wednesday Father Juan got up early and went out for his jog. There was a slight mist in the predawn light and the coolness felt good on his skin, like a kiss against the coming heat of the afternoon. The country slowly started to reveal its subtle secrets to him – the harsh call of a mocking bird challenging his passing or the bright flash of wing as a crane shot off from the reeds. Each run began to feel familiar, friendly; the way listening to new band can be difficult at first, only to have the music work its way into your consciousness until your thoughts run with it and you have to play their music again and again.

A different route coming back brought him to the corner of Road 614 and Road 527. There he found the remains of a large complex – government buildings or maybe a housing complex, all burned or broken down to the ground. Popping up amidst the ruins, like so many square mushrooms, were buildings scattered here and there, with a great big warehouse off the road and brand new foundations for more buildings in between. A single white truck, off in the distance, bore the legend “Alvarez Trucking” on the side of it’s trailer. Father Juan watched it back into the warehouse as he rounded the corner and soon it was out of sight. Fresh dirt and wide tire tracks near the entrance to the complex told of many trucks coming and going. So this is where he gets his money, Father Juan thought as he started to see the familiar sights of town. That explains the Mercedes and the suits. Something about the warehouse and the trucks made him feel at ease. He had come a long way from the barrio where he grew up and where few Anglo faces were to be seen. A successful man in business, a successful Latino, he chided himself, meant something to his eyes and while he was too polite to say it, it still made him feel better. Success where he grew up usually meant another kind of business, one he was glad to have escaped many years ago.

After a shower and light breakfast, Father Juan walked to Holy Family Parish and let himself in the unlocked back door. The coffee was already going but Father Jacob and Miss Hoffman were nowhere to be seen. The sound of a large engine starting, including the odd backfire, a sound for all the world like a shotgun, told Father Juan exactly where the senior priest and secretary were located. With a grin, he poured himself a cup of coffee, adding liberal amounts of cream and sugar and then sealed himself in his little cubby to focus on the paperwork which was already beginning to pile up.

By one o’clock he had made a large dent in the “incoming” pile and was starting to feel the need for a break. His stomach gurgled in agreement. Grabbing his mug he headed for the kitchen where he heard the sounds of useful work. The deserted sanctuary made the sounds of the kitchen seemed

quite loud, yet he hadn't noticed them at all a second ago, being so focused on his work. A bigger surprise awaited him in the kitchen.

When he rounded the corner he discovered two girls putting together the finishing touches on a pile of sandwiches. Father Juan didn't know what shocked him more, the appearance of two girls in the church or the pile of sandwiches. For some reason, it bothered him that he had been so focused. He didn't hear the girls working. Judging by the size of the pile, they must have been there for some time.

"Um, hello ladies," he said as he entered the room. The two girls looked up from their work and smiled in unison. The girls were much alike and yet totally different. They were both tall and had long hair. One was light skinned, a strawberry blonde. The other had coffee colored skin and jet black hair. They were alike enough to be bookends, yet different enough to be opposites.

The fairer of the two girls wiped her hands on a towel and rushed around the kitchen island to meet him. "Oh, my gosh," she exclaimed. "Mother will kill me for forgetting my manners. Hi Father Juan. I'm Lisa Hoffman, Miss Hoffman's daughter. And this is Jade Alvarez. Mom asked us to help out on our lunch break so we've been in here making lunch. Sandwiches, really."

"And salad," said Jade, pointing to a big bowl of potato salad.

"And salad," parroted Lisa.

Lisa had a spot of mayonnaise on the back side of her hand and a few water spots on her shirt. Jade sported similar water spots and a dab of mustard on her cheek. Both girls had their hair tied back but several strands had worked their way loose. They also wore matching blue and gold aprons, compliments of some merchandising company back east. The rest of their clothing matched as well, except for their earrings. Lisa's were blue and Jade's were gold.

Father Juan looked back and forth between the two several times and then laughed out loud. When the girls stopped smiling and arched their eyebrows to question in unison, he only laughed louder. "Forgive me ladies," the priest finally managed to get out. "I feel like I just stepped out of my office and onto a television show. Do I get to choose between curtain number one or curtain number two?"

"Or, you can choose what's behind this box," Jade said as she posed like a model, her hands gracefully indicating the potato salad.

"Or," Lisa said, indicating the large platter, "You can chose one of these fabulous sandwiches."

After the three of them shared a laugh, Father Juan said, “You two are much too funny. You are a perfect set of twins or maybe twins gone wrong. All you need is the letter “S” and the letter “P” on your outfits to complete the picture.”

“The team calls us salt and pepper,” said Jade.

“But,” said Lisa, “We call ourselves the evil twins.”

“Evil twins,” Father Juan asked? “This I’ve got to hear.”

“Well...” continued Lisa, “We went to dinner late one night after a game in Lubbock...”

“Abilene,” interrupted Jade.

“Abilene,” Lisa continued. “At a Denny’s. There was a group of boys there from the tournament and the whole place was packed at something like midnight. A cute boy from U.T. Dallas...”

“He wasn’t that cute,” said Jade.

“Says you,” Lisa responded. “You’re the one who wanted to sit by him.”

Jade’s cheeks turned red as a beet. “Only because you thought his friend was cute.”

Now it was Lisa’s turn to turn red. “Well,” she said in her defense. “He was cute, in a chunky kind of way.”

“Pffft!”

“Anyway....” said Lisa...

“Anyway,” interrupted Jade, “This boy looked around the restaurant and said, ‘have you noticed that this place is packed with twins? Evil twins?’ And you know, he was right. The place was packed with twins.”

“So,” continued Lisa. “We’ve been the evil twins ever since.”

“Except,” Jade said, “when they call us salt and pepper.”

“Which is soooo totally not us, ” said Lisa.

“Not even,” said Jade.

The two girls were nodding in unison. It was all Father Juan could do to not burst out laughing again. “Okay, your twinship, or should I say, your evilship?”

“I prefer, ‘Your Grace’,” said Jade. Then she looked thoughtful. “Your graces?”

“‘Your evilship’ will do,” said Lisa being helpful.

“Excellent,” said the priest. “Is there anything I can do to help, your evilship?”

The girls laughed. “Boys just get in the way,” said Lisa. “At least that’s what mom always says.”

“You can clean up,” suggested Jade. “If you think you are up to the task.”

“Clean up,” stammered Father Juan in mock seriousness. “Like a common bus boy? I’ll have you know, young evils, that some men are quite competent in the kitchen. And by competent I don’t mean able to do such lowly tasks as cleaning up. Why if it wasn’t socially unacceptable for a bachelor of my age to offer such a thing to lovely young ladies such as yourselves, I would invite you over to my humble kitchen and teach you a thing or two.”

“I’ll tag along,” came a voice from the back of the church. Father Juan and the girls turned to find Miss Hoffman followed by Father Jacob entering the kitchen. “I make a mean chaperone,” she continued, “plus I can double as a sous chef.”

“Well then,” Father Juan said in the same overly formal tone. “I believe we have an appointment.”

“Sorry to cut in on the fun but is lunch ready,” Father Jacob asked? “The men are about to show up.”

“The sandwiches are done,” said Lisa.

“And the potato salad,” said Jade.

Father Jacob looked at the food and nodded. “Good,” he said. “Well done. Do we have any drinks?”

“There’s soda in the fridge,” said Lisa.

“And we started a fresh pot of coffee,” said Jade.

“Excellent,” said Father Jacob. “Father Juan would you please help me set up the tables? Miss Hoffman is no doubt waiting on us.” The senior priest then turned towards the girls. “Thank you again ladies. Your work is excellent, as always. The church is in your debt. Did you wish to join us for lunch?”

“No thank you, Father Jacob,” said Lisa.

“We’ve got to get back to 6th period,” said Jade.

“We ate already, anyways,” said Lisa.

“Well then, run along girls and thank you again for your help. Father Juan, do you want to grab that end?”

The two priests quickly set up tables in the back hall and Miss Hoffman

brought out a stack of folding chairs on a cart. Before long they had chairs and place settings set out for twenty people. As it turned out, twenty wasn't enough.

## Chapter 8

Father Juan was so busy getting extra chairs and setting out the food that he didn't notice how large the crowd had gotten until Father Jacob bowed his head for the blessing. The back foyer was packed with men, most in the uniform of t-shirts and blue jeans with dirt still on their work boots. The men removed their cowboy hats and baseball caps for their prayer. Their lowered heads and unkempt hair made Father Juan think about a chapel he had visited one day in Northern Mexico. It had been the saint's holy day and the local farmers had packed the chapel with their hair slicked back, wearing worried faces. Smelling equal parts cologne, sweat, and fear they held their hats in the same awkward way as the Anglo farmers before him, as if they were afraid, worried their prayers would go unanswered if they made the wrong move or did the wrong thing.

The men all started eating while Father Jacob talked.

"I called this meeting because there's been a lot of talk and I think we need to really take a hard look at this. Now Barney told me... what was it...two weeks ago that his well had gone dry. His cotton will do okay he says as he can use his other well but he knew this was going to quarter his production if he wanted to pull anything out."

All the heads nodded between bites. News travels fast in a small town. This was something they had all heard by now.

"Then last week, Fred Meyers told me his well run dry. I didn't think much of it then, we all know his pump was hit-or-miss and had been for years."

This brought more nods from the farmers. Fred Meyers liked to tell everyone about his well and about his goat and his wife and his truck. There was always something with Fred.

"So Sunday afternoon, Hans Müller and Dick Schmidt, both called me up independently and told me about their wells. That was when I started to realize



there might be a problem, here.”

This made everyone pause. The water table in the Texas panhandle had been dropping steadily for years. To combat this, most farmers had dug deeper wells. They all knew, at least intellectually, that there was a limit to how deep one could drill and still hit water but they all had bills to pay as well. Barney and Fred both had small operations and their wells were known to be close to the water table, maybe 100 feet down or so. But Hans Müller and Dick Schmidt both had recently dug fairly deep wells. Hans’ well was especially troublesome as it was 50 feet deeper than most of the wells in town. If he was having problems, then none of them were safe. The room had gotten appreciably quieter as this news sunk in.

“Now you see why I called this meeting. From the looks on some of your faces, I can guess you’re worried for your crops and your families. Well, so am I. Only I’m not much for worrying if there is something to do. So I thought we could work through some of this and see what we can do or can’t do.”

Father Jacob took a bite of sandwich and let this last bit sink in. These men were his friends, and he knew them well. They would start asking questions soon enough after they had done some thinking.

Father Juan and Miss Hoffman sat back in the door way. Near enough where they could help but far enough back that they didn’t interfere. While Father Jacob and the men quietly ate their lunch, Miss Hoffman whispered into Father Juan’s ear, catching him up to speed. He listened with half an ear, watching the farmers with rapt attention. A city boy through and through, Father Juan did not appreciate the value of water or what the lack of it could do to a farming community. Every farmer’s child knows down to their bones what drought could do to a farm and they fear it. The Hoffman family was one of the few that remained in town after the drought and dust bowl in the 30s when the population had dropped from 250 to only 75. She had been raised on the stories of hardship and bravery until she could recite them in her sleep.

Father Juan watched the farmers stoically eating their food, and marveled at their nerve, not realizing that years and years of experience had taught these men that rash decisions killed more farms than drought or disease.

One of the men stood up. He looked older than most and a bit weathered. He looked around until seeing a man in a blue shirt on the other side of the room. He spoke his question aloud but it was obviously directed at the man in the blue shirt. "Did you get Jacob’s to drill that new well of yours, Hans, or did you hire McGortney’s?”

The man in the blue shirt, apparently Hans Müller, stood up and addressed the question. “Bill, you know I hired McGortney. You don’t like the man, I know. You’ve made that plain to anyone with ears. He offered me a fair price and did a fair job. If you’re thinking he cheated me on depth, well I checked that well twice before we capped it. Had my son check it too. Didn’t win any friendship with McGortney over that either, I can tell you, but I was putting out too much money to not check it over careful. It’s 230 feet, if it’s an inch.”

“And the pump?” someone asked before Hans could sit down.

“Oh, it draws alright. It’s deep enough where I can back fill quite a bit and then run it up again. I’ve tested it twice a day for three days now. If there’s water down there, it’ll bring it up.”

Several men stood up, patiently waiting their turn. Father Jacob stood up and spoke over them. “You might as well know I went over to Müellers and Schmidt’s place yesterday. Near as I can tell, their wells work fine. If there was water down there, they’d pull it up.”

At this, most of the men sat down. Father Jacob was known as a gifted mechanic and was called out to fix tractors as much he was for the more spiritual calls. He kept several boxes of tools in the back of his station wagon at all times for just this reason.

Father Jacob sat down again and another man spoke up. He looked younger than most and had a neatly trimmed beard and a Longhorn's cap. “Pardon me Father but I suspect you wouldn’t have called us here if you didn’t have a solution.” This brought nods from the rest of the room. The man sat down and after a moment the other men sat down too.

When no one else rose, Father Jacob got heavily to his feet.

“Well I called the water board,” he said. This brought jeers and moans from all over the room. “Well, I had to check,” he said. “They told me the same thing they’ve always said. According to the people in Austin we’re on our own. I also talked to the county people in Dimmit. They pretty much said the same thing. They might have some kind of program or grant or something but everything they talked about would take months or years to put in place. That might be a good long term fix but I’m hoping we find a better short term solution.” The priest then pointed to the man with the Longhorn's cap, “Mark there called his friends over at U.T., but it looks like this late in the year they’ve already gone through their grants.” The man with the cap nodded in agreement. “That leaves us with the people in Washington. I’ve put in calls to both senators and our representative but haven’t heard anything yet.”

In the silence, he continued. "I'm telling you this just so you know I'm trying to cover every base. No doubt I have missed something so if you think of something don't hesitate."

The room remained in silence for a moment then one of the men got up. "I can go a month," he said, "or even a season with no water. Heck, I done it before. I can even let my fields run fallow if that's what it takes. But that won't go over well with the bank. If the rain don't come and I can't set down a couple of blocks worth of cotton by late spring, I might as well sell out now."

Many of the men nodded their heads in agreement. Farming was hard work and required hard decisions. These men didn't want fancy promises, they wanted to work. Father Jacob looked around the room trying to gauge the mood like a weather sock tells a pilot which way the wind is blowing. "There is one thing," he said instantly getting their attention. "Tony Alvarez told me last week he was starting to ramp up in his deliveries and he needed more drivers. Paul Doyle, the new coach, is already driving for him so you can ask him what he thinks." The room relaxed just a bit. "Now I know," Father Jacob continued, "Some of you don't care much for Tony." There were mummings of dissent from several spots which Father Jacob silenced with his hands. "Don't think I'm pointing any fingers here but I know some of you ain't as comfortable with having our money go to Mexico." He held their attention with his eyes. "Many of you told me just exactly that when Tony bought out the old Army base so don't tell me it ain't true now." He looked at them all, daring them to tell him he was wrong. Some men even had the decency to look embarrassed. One of two looked sheepishly over at Father Juan who was wise enough to look away.

"It's not Tony," said a red faced man from the back, near the door. "It's those damn Mexicans, Father. If you pardon my French – the illegals. They get into everything and cause a mess. But Tony, he ain't like those others. He started out poor, dirt poor and worked his way up. Just like us. You can tell just by talking to him. He may dress fancy but he's a farmer if I ever met a man."

The man sat down, his face still red, among murmurs of support. One or two men nodded.

"Well I'm glad that's settled," Father Jacob said with mock gravity. Some of the men laughed and the tension left the room. "I like Tony. He seems like a straight up man to me.", he said. "The funny thing is he sounds a lot like some of you, going on about illegals and such. That is part of his problem – seems he hired a few illegals who got picked up by the Sheriff and left his delivery without a driver. A man can go broke pretty quick that way or so he says. He needs drivers who knows the area, knows the local and won't get busted by the local

law enforcement. Which is why he came to me and asked if there were any farmers who needed to supplement their income. He'd rather pay more for a local farmer to drive, than pay less and leave his delivery in jeopardy."

One of the men near the back stood up. "That sounds okay, Father, but driving trucks doesn't bring in the harvest. If anything it will keep us further from home."

"Sure," said Father Jacob. "It's not a good solution and no amount of money will replace our water. But it does buy us time and it does keep the bank off our land. Both of those things I think are pretty good." He paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. "Look. There might be a chance, an outside one mind you but a chance, that Austin or Washington might step in here and offer some real help. Now I know how y'all feel about handouts. One of the things I like about this town is that you farmers don't go running off to the government whining and crying every time you don't get your way." This brought a chuckle from the room. After a pause, Father Jacob continued. "But I also know them big cities will stop at nothing to take all the water they can get and they will happily drink our wells dry if we don't stop them. We have the right to our fair share and the law is on our side but it will take time, lots of time, until we can get us some help. Until then, I think any solution that keeps our farms afloat is a good one."

The room filled with "Amens", clapping and "Yes sirs". Father Jacob stood for a moment looking around, then sat down. The room went quiet – the farmers thinking.

One man stood up. He looked younger, maybe in his mid twenties – old enough to be included with the men but young enough to still be self-conscious about it. "Uh, is that all Father? Is that all we can do? I mean, what else can we do, Father, besides farm with what water we have and drive for Tony?"

"Pray son," Father Jacob said standing up again. "Pray for rain. Pray like we never have before. Pray until the water covers this land. We can, and will, do all these things. But we will also pray."

## Chapter 9

Seeing that the meeting was over, the farmers got up, and made their way out the back. Many stopped to shake hands with Father Jacob or thank him for his help. They didn't stay long as they all had work to do. Before long the room was empty. Father Juan and Emily started picking up the room, tossing the paper plates in the trash and taking the serving trays and left over food into the kitchen.

While they were working, Father Juan asked her, "Is it as bad as it sounds?"

Emily stopped long enough to look at his face, and then continued to wipe down one of the tables. "It's worse," she said as she deftly cleaned the surface. "Farms around here have been struggling for a while. Pretty much everyone wants to work with 10 thousand acre operations or larger – the banks, the government, the distributors. There's more money in it and less risk. Around here most of the farms are 400 acres or less. They simply can't compete – and that is without the ever lowering water table. Between the two, it doesn't leave much room for profit or hope. Not that most of these farms show a profit."

Father Juan thought about this for a second. "Then why do it? Why farm if everyone is so against it?"

Emily stopped wiping the last table, unconsciously pushing a few stray strands of her hair over an ear. It was a habit she did while lost in thought, like she was now. "Well, the short answer is because it's what they do. It's in their blood. For instance, my family has been here for years. We managed to make it through the dust bowl and still scratched a living out of the land when most of the town packed up and left. The way I figure, the way most these guys figure, if we can make it through that, we can make it through this."

She started to fold up some chairs, then stopped. "But..."

"But," asked the priest?

"But it's more than that. There are some things, some jobs that are good to do – important to do – worth doing. The work, farming the land, is in itself a beautiful thing. Most of these men," she said while indicating the empty room, "couldn't tell you a poet from a potato. Except for Bill Keim, the one in the red Longhorn's cap – I went to U.T. about the same time he did – except for him, most of these men don't have much of an education. Oh they're not stupid, not by any means. Ask them about growth rates, harvest yields, feed per foot/acre water or any of the hundreds of things a modern farmer needs to know and you'll find out right quick these men are sharp as tacks. But they are not educated. They all know there is a thing about farming, about working the land, about feeding others that is terribly important – maybe even sacred, if I can say

that without offense. They just may not have the words to say it.”

“I am reminded,” said Father Juan, “of something Jesus said. ‘The worker is worthy of his wages.’ It’s actually a reference to the Old Testament. One of the few times Jesus mentions the prophets. I’m not a huge bible scholar but I’ve always thought that verse meant that God thought work was important – good honest work.”

Emily looked at him and smiled. “Yah,” she said. “I like that. These men are not scholars but the work they do is important. Very important. I like the idea that God thinks so too. That... that makes sense. Makes sense to me.”

“So,” he continued. “Is there anything you can think of to help?”

“Me?” said Father Juan. “I don’t see how. I’m a city boy. I don’t know the first thing about farming except to pray for rain. But not too much rain.”

*(Thanksgiving 11/25)*

One week and a day after the big water meeting at the parish, was the Thanksgiving holiday. Even though the holiday had its roots in the secular world it always struck Father Juan as being particularly Christian. The idea that one should be thankful for the riches they have been given in this life struck him as solid church doctrine and good common sense. This year’s holiday found him stranded – too busy with the parish schedule to visit friends elsewhere and too new in the community to make good friends here. It had been years since he didn’t cook for someone on this day and sitting in his apartment with the oven cold did not make him happy. Even his beloved Lakers had the day off, their game against the Jazz would be on Friday. The TV offered him other games to watch but Football was just not as interesting to him. He could appreciate the game but he was not really a fan. He longed for something to do, something he could be a part of.

By 3 o’clock he found himself pacing and could not take it any more. He picked up the phone and called Patty Pérez.

“Tia,” he practically shouted when she answered the call. “I’m in a funk. You gotta help me out.”

“Hello Mijo,” she said with a smile in her voice. “There’s no funk that can conquer my nephew. Why don’t you tell me about it?”

Father Juan could hear the sound of a football game going on in the background but it soon was replaced by the sounds of a kitchen. "I'm sorry," he said. "I just realized I must be interrupting you."

"Nonsense," she replied. "Your uncle has the football on but watching that just makes my teeth hurt. Besides I'd rather talk to you. What's up?"

Father Juan filled her in on the latest stuff at church. He told her about the wedding and about the water meeting last week. She listened patiently and when he was through she filled him in on the latest gossip from her parish.

His aunt was the one who taught him about parish gossips and the importance of their position. She herself was one for her parish, only Father Juan had realized long ago that she was usually careful to use her influence to help those around her, not hurt them. Her insight into the political ramifications of a living, working parish was a big help to Father Juan and to anyone else willing to overlook her short stature and find the gem underneath. She could be amazing blunt with people when she thought they were acting foolish but what endeared her to Father Juan was that she was also equally blunt when she herself made a mistake.

"Well," she said. "I think you're doing fine, Mijo."

"But it sure doesn't feel that way," he replied.

"Sure," she said. "You're a man. You need to do things. This is how men care for stuff, by doing. You just haven't found a way to "do" for your parish yet. But you've only been there a little while, only a month. You have to give yourself some time. Don't worry. You'll find a way."

"I guess you're right, Tia..." he said with almost a whine.

"You guess? What do you mean you guess? I'm always right."

Father Juan laughed. "I forget, Tia. You're right. You're always right. Even when you're wrong, you're right. Right?"

"That's better," she said. "You were starting to scare me for a second. I thought I raised you better."

"Yes you did, Tia, yes you did. Listen, I'm going to quit bugging you, and stop feeling sorry for myself."

"Now that sounds more like my Mijo," she said.

"Thanks for listening, Tia. You've been a big help."

"Take care Mijo. Call me if you need me."

“I will, Tia. Good bye.”

“Bye.”

Father Juan hung up the phone and looked around his room. His apartment may be empty, he thought to himself, but he was never alone. Pulling out his prayer book, he got down on his knees and prayed.

## Chapter 10

*(Saturday, 11/27)*

Two days later found Father Juan hard at work on the basketball backboard attached to the barn. It had bothered him that the basket hung crooked with the rim leaning slightly to the right, so he decided to borrow a ladder from his landlady and reattach it straight and level. It wasn't much but it was a start.

A few hours later and several skinned knuckles, Father Juan was just finishing tightening up the last bolt when the neighbor boy, the one who liked to play basketball, came walking up.

“Hola,” he called down to the boy. “What ‘cha think?”

The boy looked up but didn't speak.

“See,” the priest said, grabbing one side of the backboard and giving it a hard pull, “I fixed the backboard so it is level and doesn't rock anymore. Wanna give it a test?”

“I can't,” said the boy. “Mom wants me to go with her to Amarillo. Buying shoes or something stupid.”

“You're mom is buying you shoes?” the priest asked.

The boy nodded.

“And you think that is stupid?” He could not keep the disbelief from his tone.

The boy gave his shoulders a shrug.

“I take it this is probably the wrong time for me to give you a lecture on respecting one's parents, eh?” Father Juan said with a smile.

The boy continued to look up at him with no expression. After a moment, he



pulled something from his back pocket. "Mom told me to give you this."

It was a letter, hand addressed to Father Juan from some place in Ohio. The time spent in the teen's pocket had wrinkled the envelope in places. No telling how long it had been there. In the upper left hand corner there was a return address but no name.

By the time Father Juan looked up from the letter, the boy had walked back to his home. Father Juan shrugged and got down off the ladder. He put the letter in his pocket and picked up his ball. Before long he was lost in thought.

That night, after a shower and dinner, Father Juan remembered the letter from that afternoon. He had tossed it on the table, along with the stack of tools he had used to fix the backboard. He finished putting the tools away and then pulled out his letter opener. One good slice allowed him to pull out several pages. Most of them were photocopies from a book. Parts of the text were highlighted with a yellow marker, along with some scribbled notes written in a loose hand on the margins. On top of these copies was a single page letter, poorly written, in the same handwriting as the envelope. It read:

*Jaime,*

*Right now you are probably wondering why I am alive. There is a reason but I do not think you want to hear it. You will anyway. There is no way to block her message. I know I tried and ended up here for my efforts.*

*The last time we met I was only there because my girlfriend talked me into going to her niece's Quinceañera. She was pregnant at the time, my girlfriend, and I was trying to do the right thing. Her family was having a mass first and since there was no way for me to back out without looking like an idiot, I went. so that's how we met but not why I'm still alive.*

*After I saw you, I knew my life was done. Over. I cannot tell you how I knew this. It was something I felt all the way down to my soul. All the strange and stupid rules we men place upon ourselves were exploded in my head like a bomb. Remember when that punk from the 162nd tried to hit Rubio and put a 9mm slug in my arm instead? It was like that, only it was my soul that was shot.*

*The divine beauty, the perfect love, poured into my heart and burned all the man from my thoughts. She left me with a choice, either embrace her or die. There was no other choice.*

*Right after it happened, I went down to Templo Santa Muerte on Melrose in Hollywood. I knew in my heart exactly where to go and just drove until I found it. I prayed. I offered up my life to her, such as it was. I had made such a mess of it. It was gone anyway. Hers to take, hers to ignore.*

*Glory be to her everlasting grace and love, she accepted me, the greatest of sinners. That is why I am still alive. There is no other reason.*

*I say this because when she comes to you, you must be ready. If you ignore her, she will leave you with no other choice. You will think the path to death leads to destruction. It may appear that way but things are not always as they appear. You of all people, blessed as you are by her gift, should know this.*

*When the time comes, choose wisely cousin.*

The letter was signed:

*Friar Paul, probably the only priest to pay child support*

Which to Father Juan was just as helpful as the envelope. Try as he might, he could not recall meeting a Friar Paul. He had met few Dominicans or Franciscans in his life and he knew next to no one who used the old title Friar anymore. The 162nd was a gang in East LA back when he was a kid but he could not recall them ever shooting someone he knew. Nor did the name of their intended target, Rubio, ring a bell. At least the letter got his first name right. The name he used before becoming a priest.

The rest of the contents were just as informative. A couple of pages were from a web page on Santa Muerte. The highlighted parts read:

*...As in ancient times the Mexicans made sacrifices to the Lord and Lady of the Dead in order to receive a peaceful demise so was this tradition carried down through the generations and has been transformed into a myriad of requests. The basic request remains always asking for a peaceful death, however the Santa Muerte can be petitioned for just about every human need....*

*...The Santa Muerte has a complete system of magic which is rare. As many traditions ascribe special requests to various saints, the Santa Muerte can grant them all. There are very few folk saints that*

*have this power. The sacred lady is one of those rare deities....*

*...These powers are attributed to the Santa Muerte because death is the ultimate destiny of all living things and you can not take away life from death....*

*...On a metaphysical and alchemical level this is easily defined: death is transitional; it brings transformation it regenerates and takes us back to an all encompassing whole. Seeds that germinate in the decaying soil will soon bring new life, so death on a metaphysical level has all the basic magical attributes – stagnation, dying, decay, germination, regeneration, rebirth, resurrection....*

The last paper was a photocopy of an old book. On the top was written: *From the lost writings of Simonzalizar.*

*In the upper mountain region of (3 words untranslatable) in a very remote village, there was practiced a strange kind of (2 words untranslatable). The priests at this temple had a heavily stratified system of worship. Each priest started as laymen and had to endure several trials to advance to the next stage. The trials could be anything from a day of heavy work in the sun, to a powerful curse against them lasting for years. The greater the misfortune they endured by these trials, the greater their advancement. These priests did not worship one god but many gods and goddesses, seeking favor, or curses from them as ways of advancing to the next stage. While the snake god (2 words untranslatable) with his eating (3 words untranslatable) ritual was a commonly petitioned, the more rare gods like the death gods, (untranslatable) and (untranslatable), granted more power. It was said that enduring xx years of his curse would grant the petitioner (2 words untranslatable). Rarely did any priest (3 words untranslatable). One priest was said to have lasted 7 years, but then (untranslatable) while reversing (3 words untranslatable). It was said that for every case of (untranslatable), death was the (untranslatable).*

*It was also common for priests from this temple to practice their arts for (untranslatable) time, and then relinquish their role, going back to (2 words untranslatable) layman, as if nothing had happened. Many of the stories I gathered suggested this was the final (5 words untranslatable) stage.*

## *Simonzalizar*

*Note: This is a scrap translated by my hand in the year of our lord 1967. Such is the age of the manuscript, that many of the words and whole paragraphs, have been damaged by time. Little is known of the origin of this manuscript. It was found in the church of St. Isabelle by a cleric in the process of cleaning up the old catacombs. The scrap is written in Latin, a language not native to the area. Supposedly these stories were collected by Simonzalizar, sometimes called Simon Salizar, who traveled North Eastern Mexico, listening to native myths and legends and compiling them in one place. All that remains of his work is this one scrap. There are no other historical references to him.*

*Fr. Augustine, St Leon, 1967*

Father Juan looked at these random pages and wondered what kind of a lunatic would send him something like this. It was crazy. It made no sense. A letter addressed specifically to him from someone he did not know, a web page devoted to a Mexican cult, and a translation from a scrap of paper with no known historical connection.

Feeling a little crazy just reading them, he stuffed the pages back into the envelope, and threw the whole thing away. Later that evening he took the envelope out of the trash and placed it in his file cabinet. It didn't take up much space and he figured he might need the letter as evidence if something weird were to happen.

## **Chapter 11**

*(Monday, 11/29)*

Monday morning, after his jog and shower, Father Juan walked the short distance to the parish. For some reason, this morning he entered the sanctuary through the front door which was really the little used door that lead straight into the chancel, sometimes called the presbytery. Since this was the part of

the church behind the altar that was usually reserved for the priests, this door was called the priest's door. It just happened to be on the front of the church which along with the bell tower, faced the St. Joseph Street. This is why everyone else usually used the back door, the one that opened into the back hall which then lead into the back of the sanctuary.

As he was passing the side-altar, Father Juan discovered that Father Jacob was already there and in a foul mood.

“Look at this!” said senior father by way of a greeting. His anger was evident on his face. Father Juan silently followed the senior father back out the same front door, around to the East side of the church and over to the statue of Mary. “There!” said the senior father. “Look at that!”

Stepping up closer to the statue of the Madonna, Father Juan looked to where Father Jacob was pointing. The virgin was standing, wearing a blue dress, her hands pressed together in supplication, her head leaning to one side and her body and crown covered in a long white shawl, representing purity. She stood in a small protective alcove with an arched top, made of adobe brown brick. On either side stood a planter with some kind of plant, Father Juan wasn't sure which. No doubt these plants in the spring would bring beautiful flowers but in late fall they looked stunted and plain. The bottom of the alcove was covered with green artificial turf. In front of the statue was a small step down, also covered in artificial turf. The step had a green padded rim to make it easier for supplicants to kneel on while praying. The artificial turf had been bleached by the sun leaving two darker spots, one on either side of the Virgin, where some other objects must have stood. On her face was the calm serene look of piety that Father Juan always associated with contentment. He crossed himself and kneeled beside the standing senior father.

Around the base of the virgin someone had placed several votives. They were out now but must have burned through the night. Lighting a candle in supplication to the Virgin was common throughout the church. However, right next to the candles was something which wasn't common. It was a pack of cigarettes, opened and unused. Next to that was a small bottle of Jack Daniels which was also opened and mostly full. A candy wrapper sat nearby, its contents mostly gone. From the remaining bits it looked like it had been eaten by rodents. More wrappers littered the bushes to one side, their contents scattered, probably gone.

“Did you find any coins?” Father Juan asked “Bits of fruit? Flowers?”

“Huh?” said Father Jacob. “Fruit? No. All I found was this trash. Well that, the cigarettes and the whiskey.”

“Uh-huh,” said Father Juan distractedly. He had gotten up and was now inspecting the Virgin more closely. Someone had folded a dollar bill and slipped it in between her fingers. “Wow,” he said without thinking.

“What?” said Father Jacob, sounding slightly peevish.

“Her hands,” Father Juan continued. “Someone slipped a dollar between her fingers.”

“So?”

Noticing the flat tone of Father Jacob, Father Juan stopped his inspection of the statue and turned to face his senior father. “Forgive me Father,” he began. “I forgot you grew up here. This must seem rather strange to you. In my neighborhood such offerings were common.”

“Cigarettes? Alcohol? Common on the Virgin Mary?” The disbelief was unmistakable.

“Yes, Father. Common. I know it sounds strange but Mexican Catholics worship a little bit differently than you... than we do up here. Especially the poor.”

“They leave trash around the Virgins down there?”

“No father. These,” Father Juan said, picking up a candy wrapper, “are candies. They are for the Virgin. Usually they are left with the tops open so it is easier for her to eat. Sometimes when they are left like this, rats or mice will come and eat them. I suspect that is why the wrappers are in the bushes over there.”

The senior priest looked over at the bushes to the side of the alcove. “Well whatever they are, I want them cleaned up.”

“Yes father,” said the junior priest.

“And I don’t want to see such trash around the Virgin again. It’s disrespectful.”

“Yes father.”

Father Jacob turned around and started back for the church. After a few steps he muttered, “I supposed I’ll have to make an announcement after the service this week...”

“Forgive me father,” interrupted the junior priest rushing to catch up. “May I make a suggestion?”

Father Jacob stopped and turned back towards the Father Juan, his tone

much more congenial. “What is it son?”

“Well if you make an announcement, it will only embarrass the Mexi... the people who are leaving these supplications. It will definitely stop them from leaving more offerings but it may also stop them from coming here at all. A better way would be to let them know they are not allowed to leave offerings like this but not from the pulpit.”

“How would you go about doing that, son?” said the senior priest. “That sounds tricky.”

“Oh no, Father. It is really quite simple. All I need is to talk to the gossip.”

“The gossip? I’m afraid you lost me, son.”

“Sure, the gossip. It is a Mexican term. It doesn’t translate well into English. She will be a woman, always a woman – usually an older one who comes to church often and everyone knows, everyone respects.”

“And this gossip,” Father Jacob asked. “You will tell her about the offerings and she will tell everyone.”

“Well, not exactly,” said Father Juan. “One does not tell a gossip. No, that will not do. She is a woman of profound influence over her community. To tell her how to do anything would be considered a grave insult.”

“Then how will you let her know?” Father Jacob asked.

“Simple,” continued Father Juan. “I will call her up and talk to her about this and that. Near the end of our conversation I will joke with her, telling her that someone left some candies and cigarettes for our Virgin. She is such a rich Virgin, I will tell her she does not need candies and trinkets from Mexico. That is all. She will know what I mean.”

“That’s it?” asked the senior father in disbelief. “You will tell her our Virgin is too rich?”

“Don’t worry father, she will know what I mean. A gossip is always the wisest woman in the church. She will know.”

“Hmm, okay,” muttered Father Jacob, “If you say so.”

The two priests turned the corner and headed for the front doors. As they were walking Father Juan thought of the cemetery behind the church. If Father Jacob was upset at these offerings, he thought, then he’d probably go ballistic if he saw a shrine to Santa Muerte. He made a mental note to ask Miss Hoffman who does the maintenance on the church’s cemetery. If offerings like this were found on the virgin, then there were bound to be more out there among the

tombstones.

As the two priests entered the vestibule, Father Jacob stopped again. “Tell me,” he asked holding open the outer door for Father Juan. “Who is this gossip in our church?”

“Oh,” said Father Juan walking past. “For this church I suspect Mrs. Keim.” Father Jacob nodded in agreement. That made sense to him. “But for the Mexicans who come here,” Father Juan continued, “well, that I don’t know. However, I’m sure I know someone who does.”

“Who?” asked the senior father.

Father Juan held open the front door and motioned for the senior father to precede him. “Miss Hoffman,” he said, “the church secretary. They always know that kind of thing.”

## Chapter 12

No sooner had Father Juan and Father Jacob entered the Church, then Miss Hoffman came running down the sanctuary towards them, her face white with fear. “Fathers, fathers,” she said. “Come quick. There is a hurt man, he is bleeding. There is blood every where, and...”

“Where? Where is he?” the men cried.

“In the back,” she said turning and running for the rear door. “He came in here and started speaking Spanish,” she managed over her shoulder leading them along at a run. “Saying something about death, something about an angel. Then he fell down on the floor. That’s when I saw the blood.”

She stopped at the doorway into the back hall and the two priests caught up with her.

Propped up against the back wall was a man. He was dark skinned and dressed in a fancy silk shirt with matching polyester slacks. His cowboy boots had shiny metal tips pointing at different angles as his legs lay sprawled like two long streamers on a broken kite. A large white hat, stained with sweat around the brim, lay on the ground just outside the opened back door. A pickup truck, old and rusted, could be seen just beyond. The driver’s side door was open, the



engine still running. The man held one hand pressed to his side. Blood covered his shirt around his hand and spots of blood could be seen against the wall. A small puddle was forming under his right side, and drops of blood could be seen leading back to the truck.

“Padre Muerte,” the man was muttering. “Padre Muerte. Oiga mi confesión.” Father Death. Father Death. Hear my confession.

Father Jacob’s face turned red and he started gasping. His mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. Father Juan ran to the man, falling on his knees. “You need help,” he said in rapid Spanish, placing a hand on the man’s shoulder. “You are hurt. You need a doctor.”

“No,” said the man, still in Spanish. “No doctors. Not yet. Please, Father Muerte, please. Hear my confession. It is the only hope for my immortal soul.”

Father Juan turned his head. “Call an ambulance...” he said in English to Miss Hoffman, “and... you better call the sheriff too.”

Miss Hoffman nodded slowly, her face a mask of shock. Father Juan turned to the senior priest. His face was pale, ears red. “Father Jacob. Can you please fetch my bible and holy water? I think we’ll be doing the last rites very soon.”

Father Jacob also nodded slowly, then as if breaking a spell, quickly left to find Father Juan’s things.

When the room was empty, Father Juan looked at the dying man. “I am here, my son,” he said quietly in Spanish. “I will hear your confession.”

The bleeding man looked up at Father Juan. “You are the skinny one? ¿El Padre Delgada? ¿Usted es el Ángel de la Muerte?”

“Yes, my son. That is what they call me.”

“Then,” the man said before pain made him gasp. “Gah... Bless me Father, for I have sinned... It has been many years since my last confession.”

“Speak the truth son and may the grace of God protect your soul.”

The man spoke quietly in broken Spanish between gasps of sharp pain. “My name is Montoya Consuello. I am from a small town near Galeana in Nuevo León. I am a bandit, a narcolecto, a bad man...”

After a while, Montoya ran down, his voice almost a whisper. Father Juan

signaled to Father Jacob who was pacing in the other room. The senior priest rushed in and handed him his bible and vial of holy water. Father Juan opened the bible at the bookmark which had been left on the last rites for just such an emergency. Working together, the two priests went smoothly through the rites as if they had practiced together for years.

When they were done Montoya turned to Father Juan and asked him a question. Father Juan replied, "Si" and then laughed. Seeing the lack of comprehension on Father Jacob's face, the junior priest translated. "He asked if the priest for the gringos has also prayed for his soul. When I told him yes, he said this was his lucky day." Still seeing a look of confusion on the father's face, he continued. "It is a joke. His mother used to tell him he was destined to end up in a big rich gringo church. Only she never said how he would get there. Now that he is here, he is finding her words, uh bitter, ironic."

Montoya gave a laugh, which trailed into a fit of coughing. Outside, they could hear coming sirens. Then the back doors flew open and the paramedics came in.

In no time they had the bandit strapped to a gurney and were preparing to leave. With great effort the bandit turned to Father Jacob and in broken English said, "Thank you Senior Father." Then he turned his eyes and mumbled something in Spanish to Father Juan. Seconds later, he was carried out the door.

No sooner had the ambulance left then Sheriff Johnson came in. He was a large man with grey hair showing on the close-cropped sides. His uniform was wrinkled from use and he carried himself as if tired. His eyes, however, were sharp, clear; full of worry. He asked them some questions, looked over the pickup and the place where Montoya had lain. Miss Hoffman had made fresh coffee and put out a plate of sandwiches. The priests and Miss Hofmann took turns answering the sheriff's questions while he took careful notes. After what seemed like hours the sheriff finally collected his things to leave. While he was talking over his radio, Father Juan looked at his watch. It was 3:21! Already, he thought. What happened to the day?

The sheriff was standing in the doorway, clipboard in his hand. "You can clean up," he said, indicating the bloodstained walls and floor. "I'll have someone come by tomorrow to pick up Mr. Consuello's truck. I'm... I'm sorry this kind of

thing happened here.”

“Why?” asked Father Juan.

“Well, it seems such a shame for a criminal to dirty a house of God like this.” the sheriff said.

“Even a criminal,” replied Father Juan, “is a child of God, Sheriff Johnson.” Father Juan looked at Father Jacob. Their eyes met. “It is the least we can do.”

Sheriff Johnson looked at them both. “Yes,” he said. “I can see that.” With a smile he shook the senior father’s hand and then Father Juan’s. “Thank you,” he said. “Thank you.”

As he was walking to his car, the sheriff stopped half way and turned. “Oh, I almost forgot. A homicide detective out of Amarillo might come by tomorrow. Would you be able to answer his questions?”

Just as Father Juan was about to respond, Father Jacob said, “We’ll be happy to help.”

“Good,” said the sheriff. “I’ll let them know.”

The two priests waved as the sheriff drove off and then they walked back into the church.

Shock and stress do funny things to people, Father Juan thought as they entered the church. He looked for Miss Hoffman to see how she was doing. Many women get upset at the sight of blood. When they entered the back hall, he found her hard at work scrubbing the walls. Well, he thought, I guess she’s not the type to get hysterical over blood. “Are you using cold water?” he asked. “It comes out easier that way.”

“How did you know that?” asked Miss Hoffman. The head priest and the secretary were looking at Father Juan in a way he didn’t like – like he had said something wrong.

“Uh, um. Let’s just say I’ve had a bit of practice,” he said, “and leave it at that.” From the look they both gave him, he knew they would bring it up again. Oh well, he thought. It’s not like I haven’t been here before.

In not much time they got the hall cleaned and the church straightened up. On his way out the door, Father Juan glanced back at the parish and noticed the statue of the Virgin. Was that really this morning when we were out there, he thought? It felt like a week ago.

*(Monday night, 11/29)*

By the time Father Juan got home he was completely exhausted. He could feel the tension of the day seeping into his back and neck. A strange energy flowed through him, making him restless – making him jumpy. Forgoing his normal habit of prayers and a light dinner, Father Juan put on his exercise clothes and grabbed his ball. The dirt court had a large light that hung over the front of the barn like the branch on a hangman's tree. He turned on the switch and the whole courtyard burst into light. Hundreds of bugs could be seen flying against the Texan twilight and the grass and field melted into deep shadow. The occasional chirp and fluttering in the sky of black against black let the priest know that some local bats were hard at work earning their keep.

The kitchen light was on in the main house, so Father Juan figured everyone was still up. He stretched his bad shoulder, did a few leg warm ups and then started taking shots – first from the free-throw line and then working his way around the key.

Before long he heard the kitchen door close and footsteps approach. It was the boy. He was dressed in shorts and an old t-shirt – his tennis shoes looking worn and tired. He held his own basketball pinned against his body by a thick wrist. His eyes looked dark – almost mean.

Father Juan looked over his shoulder and then took his shot. The way the boy stood there was not a question. It was a challenge. Father Juan retrieved his ball and then turned, holding it in one hand. “Had a bad day?” he asked.

“You could say that,” the boy replied.

“Good. So did I,” said Father Juan. He waited a second, letting the cool night air, the stillness, clear his head. “Your ball or mine?” he asked.

“Yours,” the boy replied. “It's newer.”

They started with a game of HORSE just to warm up but soon switched to one-on-one. The ball went fast, the game played hard. No quarter was asked and none given. Neither one spoke except to say the score. Words weren't necessary. They threw themselves into the game, playing for all they were worth – playing angry and playing hard. Checks hit like blows. Blocks more like tackles. At times the ball hit the backboard with such force that it rang like a bell. They fought, they screamed, they crashed. Each stretching his limits to the breaking point and then stretching them some more. It wasn't pretty. At times it wasn't even basketball. It was more than that. It was two men pinned down to their lives by their anger. Neither was willing to lay still – neither willing to

give in.

After a while, they finished a game – their third, their fifth? They did not know. Both were bent over, breathing through their mouths. Panting hard – hands on their sides. Sweat dripped off their chins and noses.

While they were playing the sky had turned dark. The cool autumn shadows like ink – hard edges blunt.

“That,” said the priest between pants. “That was the best... (pant) the most glorious... (pant) game of B-Ball... (pant) I ever... (pant) played.”

The boy just grinned, panting too hard to speak.

“By the way,” continued the priest with his own smile. “I never learned... (pant) your name.”

“It’s Mali,” said the boy. “Mall-eee.”

“Mali?” asked the priest. “What’s that short for?”

“Aeloli Malieitolula,” said the boy.

“Ae-la-Mali-con-fer...” tried the priest. “Um, I think I’ll stick with Mali if you don’t mind.”

“Its fine,” said Mali.

The two players gingerly raised themselves upright, feeling bruised and knocked around.

“You’re bleeding,” said Mali, pointing to the priest’s arm. “From your arm, you’re bleeding.”

“What?” said the priest.

“Your arm,” said the boy, pointing again.

“Oh,” said Father Juan, using his opposite hand to pull the skin around into better view. “You’re right.” He let go of his arm and looked around for his sweat towel.

“What is that?” asked the boy. “Is that a scratch?”

On the priest’s right arm, between the bicep and the tricep was a small wound about the size of a dime – a bleeding wound. “No, it’s not a scratch.” said the priest as he wiped up the small amount of blood with his towel. “It’s an old wound that won’t heal. It’s a stigmata.”

“Stigmata? What’s it mean?” asked the boy. “It looks like a skull or

something.”

The wound, the stigmata, slightly resembled a skull but only when bleeding.

“It means,” answered the priest, “that somebody just died.”

“Oh...”

“Yes,” said the priest. “Oh...”

## Chapter 13

*(Tuesday morning, 11/30)*

Father Juan woke with the sun the next morning. The bathroom’s pale green light revealed the start of new bruises on his arms and legs. His smile grew in the mirror. Sometimes being sore was worth it. The stigmata had also stopped bleeding. He took off the gauze pad he had learned to tape onto it after every confession. We all cope in strange ways he thought.

Since it was too early to work and he was too sore to run, Father Juan sat down in his small apartment and began to pray. Prayer had always been a source of strength for him, a release. This time was no different. His rosary was very old. It was from his maternal grandmother, a woman he had never met but in whom he often felt a deep kinship. The small irregular black beads taken from stones in the desert, felt cool and calming in his hand, helped him focus and concentrate. He prayed for his church, both the parish he worked in, and the mother church in general. He prayed for his friends old and new, prayed for the souls of his family, prayed for the country, prayed for the poor, and finally, as he always finished his prayers, he prayed for humility and compassion to continue to be of service.

When he opened his eyes again, the sun was already high in the sky. He got up stiffly, the pain reminding him again about the game last night. He felt at peace, alive, happy, and content. More so, he felt like he might finally have found a home, a place to relax, to be at ease. This hope coursed through his veins as he quickly dressed and headed to the church. Every plant he passed, every house, even the stray dogs which barked at him, all somehow made him feel at home. He hoped, he prayed it was so.

When he got to the church he first went around to see the Virgin. No new offerings had been left, which he hoped was a good sign. He reminded himself to talk with Miss Hoffman about the gossip, as he started picking up the wrappers and the offerings. As he was wondering what to do with the bottle of Jack and the cigarettes he suddenly wondered what Miss Hoffman's first name was. "Where did that idea come from?" he thought. With a shake of his head, he picked up what he could and walked around to the front of the church.

Just before he rounded the corner he looked back and saw the pale blue truck which belonged to Montoya Consuello. It was still sitting in the same place, although someone, (the sheriff?), had closed its door. For the hundredth time he wondered if his curse was a benefit to those who confessed to him or not. Did God really offer them forgiveness? He knew what the church's doctrine said but he had seen so many people die that he often wondered. With a shrug, he continued on his way. As usual, he concluded, also for the hundredth time, that there were simply some things man was not meant to know. He did not like it but he was comfortable with the idea that God did not have to consult him, a lowly priest, with every act.

Once inside, Father Juan made it to the small office in the back and started in on the paperwork left over from yesterday. The church was a big believer in keeping good records which meant that priests had to be good at writing them. He had been the junior priest at so many parishes, a job that often included the lion's share of the paperwork, that he had become quite proficient at filling out the myriads of forms. At noon he finally took a break, stood up and stretched and decided to have a second cup of coffee. When he stepped from his little nook, into the main office, he noticed that Miss Hoffman wasn't there. He was about to call out her name when he heard the now familiar sound of her footsteps on the floor near the back hall. Hearing voices as well, Father Juan followed them out of the office, through the sanctuary and entered the hall.

With the exception of some slight blood stains on the wall, the hall appeared as if nothing had happened the day before. A tall man in a grey suit was squatting down examining the wall where Montoya Consuello had lain. He had the fair skin and spoke his words with a pronounced drawl.

"Oh," said Miss Hoffman seeing him enter the room. "Father Juan. This is detective Eaves from the sheriff's office."

"Hola, Señor," said Father Juan as the detective stood up, stretching out his hand.

"Um, hi," said the detective. The two men shook hands. The sheriff had a firm grip.

“So you’re the priest Mister Consuello talked to?” asked the detective.

“One of them,” replied Father Juan, trying to sound casual.

“Uh yes,” said the detective. He started looking through his notebook. “I’ve already talked to umm, Father Jacob. He was most helpful. But... he said that most of the time Consuello spoke in Spanish. Is this true?”

“Yes,” replied the priest.

“Hmm. Then you are aware that Mister Consuello is a criminal?” asked the detective.

“Yes,” said the priest. “He told me so.”

“Do you know who Consuello works for or who tried to kill him?”

“His jefe?” said the priest. “Yes. I do, at least the first part. He was not too sure exactly who was trying to kill him. At the time, it was not exactly important to him. He had other things on his mind.”

The detective looked at him for a second, face clearly puzzled, then went back to his notebook. “Great,” he said. “I’d like to finish this case and get back to town.” He pulled out a notebook and pencil, then looked the priest in the eye. “Okay. Shoot.”

“Shoot?”

“Yes,” said the cop. “Shoot. Who’d Consuello work for? What were his criminal ties?”

“Um,” the priest said. “I... I cannot.”

“Huh?” said the detective.

“I can not tell you,” said the priest.

“Why not?” asked the cop. His tone grew sharp.

“Because,” said the priest, “It was a confession.”

“A confession,” said the detective. “We use confessions all the time.”

“It was not that kind of confession,” replied the priest. “He asked for a confession, the religious kind. He was quite specific. Once that happened I am obligated to not divulge to anyone what he told me.”

The detective stared at him. The room felt suddenly cold. Father Juan licked his lips while Miss Hoffman crossed her arms.

“You’re telling me you know he is a criminal?” said the detective.

“Yes.”



“And that you know who Consuello works for...”

“Worked for... Yes.”

“Worked for?”

“Yes. Senior Consuello died, last night in fact.”

“He’s dead?” said the detective in disbelief. “Consuello is dead and no one told me?”

The detective pulled a cell phone from his belt and slid it open. “Excuse me a second,” he said as he walked out the back door.

Father Juan was left standing in the foyer with Miss Hoffman. After a moment he looked up at her. Without thinking he asked, “What is your name? Your first name I mean? I just realized I don’t know it, and, well...”

Miss Hoffman jerked her head up with a start. She had been staring at the place where Montoya Consuello and leaned against the wall. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I must have been thinking about...” After a second her eyes focused on Father Juan. “It’s Emily. Emily Schmidt. Hoffman is my maiden name.”

“Your maiden name?” the priest asked. “I didn’t know you were married.” For some reason this was important to him, although he couldn’t think why.

“Was married. He... uh... he... I’m a widow.”

“Oh,” said the priest. “I’m terribly sorry. I had no idea.”

“It’s okay,” she replied. “Things weren’t going so well. He...”

The door suddenly opened and the detective came in. “Well that sure changes things,” he said, oblivious to the awkward way the priest and the secretary were standing.

“It does?” asked Emily.

“Yes. Consuello is indeed dead.”

“How sad,” Emily said. “He was just here a moment ago... But how does being dead change things?”

“Yes, well you see...” started the detective.

“It’s now a homicide,” said the priest.

The detective gave the priest a look, a flash of something – anger? “Yes,” he said, “it is.”

“Is there a separate homicide detective for the county,” Father Juan asked, “or do you handle that as well?”

“I do both,” said the detective.

“Good,” said the priest. “That makes things easier. I don’t want to go through this again. Why don’t we go to the church’s office and have a seat?” Father Juan held out his arm, indicating the doorway into the sanctuary. Emily started off and detective Eaves, flashing the priest a hard look, followed. When they got to the office, Emily took the seat behind her desk and Father Juan showed detective Eaves the extra chair. Then he stepped into his own nook, grabbed his desk chair and brought it into the room. When they were all seated, the detective began again.

“As you know,” he said, “It is my job to try and prevent crime in this county.” Both the priest and the secretary nodded their heads. “To do that,” he continued, “I need to be able to know about crime and criminals. Especially I need to know about crime before it happens.” They nodded again, so he continued. “So, if you have information about a crime or a criminal that will protect the law abiding citizens in this state, I need to know about it, right?”

There was silence.

“You understand what I am saying, right?” asked the detective.

“Yes,” said Father Juan. “We understand perfectly.”

“Well if you understand,” said the detective. “Then why aren’t you telling me what I need to know?”

Father Juan and Emily looked at each other. “It’s not about desire, detective. I would love to tell you everything I know. I simply cannot. If I tell you something and it goes to court then everything I say will be allowed as evidence. Once the defense lawyers find out I revealed anything to you from a confession, then that will end the trial, period. Believe me. I’ve been down that road. You don’t want to go there. I do want to tell you. I would love to do nothing more than to give you very specific details. Unfortunately, I cannot. Both my conscience and my vows as a priest forbid it.”

“So there is nothing you can do.”

“I didn’t say that,” said the priest. “I cannot answer specific questions but I might be able to answer general questions. Maybe even point you a little in the right direction.”

“Well, then start pointing,” said the cop.

The priest held his arms out wide, as if to show he was unarmed. He then placed them together again on his lap. “I can’t, at least not yet,” he said. “I need some time to pray – time to think about it.”

“What’s there to think about?” asked the cop leaning forward in his seat. “Either the man is a criminal or he’s not. Either he committed crimes or he didn’t. Either he told you things about his criminal world or he didn’t. What’s to think?”

“It’s not quite as simple as that,” said the priest, hands still in his lap. “When a man thinks he is at the end of his days he will say things, all kinds of things, some real, some not. A man such as this is quite close to the end, to the beyond. To him the spiritual world is just around the corner, a place he is just about to enter. He will see things, say things, as if he is already there. In a very real sense he is no longer among the living.”

The detective crossed his arms across his chest. The muscles on his jaw clenched and unclenched. “Are you saying, Father, that Consuello was crazy?”

“No, not at all,” said the priest. “He was dying. He knew he was dying. He even sought me out because he was dying. A man in that position is not like a regular man. Being that close to the end of one’s life changes things, sometimes profoundly. Have you ever had a person tell you to live your life as if it was your last day? Well that is what he was doing. It was his last day, really his last minutes. A man in that position will see things, say things that really do not make sense to us but are greatly important to them.”

The detective still did not look convinced. “So the reason you’re not talking now is because what he said doesn’t make sense?”

“Not quite,” replied the priest. “For instance, Señor Consuello talked about loving his wife and his children. The fact that he only cheated on her twice was terribly important to him. Yet he felt it equally important to warn me about an old witch living outside of town. He was also worried about an evil curse about to destroy this whole area. To him, all of these things were equally real, equally important. But to us... well I do not see any witches around here, do you? Do you see my problem?”

In the distance, the sound of a gas mower could be heard through the church’s closed window. “Hmm,” said the detective. “Why not, ah... why not just tell me everything then? Wouldn’t that be easier?”

“Have you ever sat with a dying man, detective Eaves? Had him tell you all his dark secrets? All his lies exposed? Have you ever spent time praying to the little shrines all over Mexico trying to find out how they all work? How they all fit with the Catholicism they practice over there or here? Forgive me for sounding impertinent, Detective Eaves. No doubt you are a very talented detective and can unravel many clues but this is an area in which you are ignorant. You simply

do not know what is important and what is not.”

The detective still had his arms crossed but his eyes held less spark. “And you do?”

“Yes, detective, I do. Believe me when I say this. I have more experience at dying than you could possibly imagine.” The way the priest said these words, the conviction in his voice, gave detective Eaves a start. He shivered while rooted to his chair. Even Emily clutched her arms to herself as if cold.

“Why,” she asked Father Juan. “Why does prayer help, Father, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Father Juan smiled at her glad for the interruption. The cop was making him mad but he didn’t know why. “Prayer, for some reason,” he said. “seems to make things clear in my mind – kind of glues things together. Think of it as meditation, if you like, detective,” he said turning towards the cop. “Although that may not make any more sense to you than prayer. For some reason, when I pray, the things that are important come to my mind and I am able to help. I believe this is the gift of the holy spirit made manifest but I will understand if you scoff at such things. I do not ask that you share my faith, only that you extend to me a little trust. I can assure you it will be rewarded.”

At this, the priest got up. The detective, somewhat unsure, got up as well. “Do you have a card?” asked the priest. “Leave it with Miss Hoffman. I’m sure I will get back to you shortly. At these words, Father Juan walked out of the office, the detective and the secretary following. “Please forgive me,” he said over his shoulder, stopping at the entrance to the hall, “but I have an urgent matter to attend. I’m sure I’ll be calling you soon.”

Without a backwards glance, the priest walked quickly through the hall and out the back door, leaving Detective Eaves and Emily standing in the doorway. Once he was out of the church, he began to whistle and the tune could be heard over the sound of the mowers and edgers as he walked out into the graveyard.

## Chapter 14

*(Thursday, 12/2)*

Father Juan sat in a fat red booth opposite Lieutenant Dellarosa. They were in a restaurant, a fancy one that served fajitas with huge tubs of chips and spicy guacamole. The beers were served in little galvanized metal tubs, buried in ice, like a poor man's champagne bucket. Slices of lime floated within. Father Juan's beer lay untouched. The lieutenant was on his third. Beads of sweat burst onto his forehead, only to be dabbed out by a napkin. Hot sunlight sparkled in one half of the room. The people at that side of the room seemed bright, animated by the light. The other half, the side their booth was in, lay dark and somber. The colors mimicked by the tone of the lunch crowd on this side – brooding, quiet, earnest.

Father Juan hated crowds as a rule but loved restaurants. He felt safe in them, a part of the crowd. Almost like a normal person, almost.

He and the lieutenant had been making chit-chat while their order came and they enjoyed most of their meal in silence, punctuated by the occasional talk to the pretty red-headed waitress. The lieutenant kept looking at her ass as she walked away, a faint smile on his lips. As Father Juan had remembered from the wedding, the lieutenant's eyes noticed everything but spoke little. Father Juan was glad he had called him first. This one, he told himself, would make a very bad enemy.

The lieutenant let out a loud belch, wiped his lips with his cloth napkin and settled back in his chair, looking for all the world like a contented man. His eyes, when they looked across the table, told another story.

“So tell me Father,” he started in. “What brings a new priest from the Nazareth Parish over to Amarillo? I should probably tell you I'm not a member of your church, although I will admit,” he said holding up his beer, “this would be a great way to get my interest.”

Father Juan opened his duffle bag and pulled out a large file folder. He set the file on the table across from him and turned it around so it was facing the lieutenant. “That's my police file. Everything, every record I've been able to collect for the past 20 years. I might have missed a thing or two, it's hard to remember every incident but for the large part, its all there.”

The lieutenant looked down at the file and then back up at the priest. “Uhh...”

“Why am I giving you this?” the priest offered, his hands rubbing in nervousness, one over another.

“I'm a lieutenant, Father. I don't do vice or family crimes,” the lieutenant continued.

“I know Lieutenant Dellarosa. I called the sheriff in Dimmitt and he told me

that the Castro County could not afford to give a town that size a homicide lieutenant. In the event of a homicide, he told me the Sheriff here in Amarillo handled the investigation. So, when I called the sheriff here, he gave me your number, an ironic coincidence seeing that we had recently met. That is why I called you.”

“Has there been a homicide at your church, Father?” said the lieutenant, suddenly alert. “Did somebody die?”

“Yes and no, Lieutenant,” said the priest. “A badly wounded man, a criminal, drove to our parish. He had been shot but at some other place. He came inside seeking comfort. We called the paramedics and the sheriff. We helped him as best we could. An hour later he was transported by paramedics to Dimmitt County Memorial. He died that night.”

“When was this?” asked the lieutenant.

“It was Monday, Monday afternoon.”

“And did the Castro Sheriff start an investigation?”

“Yes, Lieutenant.” said Father Juan. “They sent a man, a Detective Eaves.”

“Eaves,” said the lieutenant. “I can’t say I know him.” The lieutenant played with his fork on his plate. “I take it you didn’t think too much of him, this detective.” It wasn’t a question.

“He seems like a good man, Lieutenant but... Well... I think he might be, uh, lacking in experience.”

“What kind of experience would that be, Father?” The question was delivered flat but the lieutenant’s eyes looked sharp.

Sensing this, Father Juan stopped and looked him in the eyes. “Do you know who Santa Muerte is, Lieutenant?”

The lieutenant’s eyes got big and his eyebrows lifted. “Santa Muerte? Sure. She is Saint Death. Every damn poor Mexican from here to Monterrey has an image of her somewhere. What’s that got to do with one of my detectives?”

“Well you see, Lieutenant,” said the priest. “You know who Santa Muerte is, I know who Santa Muerte is but detective Eaves, well, he doesn’t.”

“Hmm,” said the lieutenant, putting his hand on his chin. “I think I see what you are getting at. Let me ask you Father, where are you from?”

“East LA.”

“The Barrio?”

“Si, but my family is originally from Mina in Nuevo Leon.”

The lieutenant's eyes shot up and let out a low whistle. Then he pressed his hands down into the seat and smiled. “Are you telling me, Father, that detective Eaves is too white? That he is a corn-fed, Texas panhandle hick? That he doesn't know the first thing about dealing with Mexicans?”

“In so many words, yes, Lieutenant.”

“Hell,” said the lieutenant. “Why didn't you say so? This wouldn't be the first time one of my men was considered a damn fool Texan. Is that why you set up this little meeting Father? Why you drove all the way up here to Amarillo?”

“Partially,” said the priest in a more guarded tone. “That's one of the reasons.”

“And the other one is this?” the lieutenant asked thumping the two inch thick folder.

Father Juan nodded, reached over and took his first swallow of beer. The ice made it so cold that it went down his throat with almost no flavor. He held the cool glass to his forehead, feeling the beads of condensation mix with his sweat. After another sip he leaned forward and continued. “Look, Lieutenant,” said the priest. “Another man is going to die. Soon. When he does, I wanted to know who to call.”

“Another man, what man? Who is going to die?” The lieutenant was now very interested.

“I don't know Lieutenant,” answered the Father.

The lieutenant looked confused. “You're telling me that another man is going to die but you don't know who? Is that correct, Father?”

“Yes Lieutenant.”

“Can you tell me how?”

“Usually by natural causes,” the priest replied. “Although there was one guy who got run over by a drunk driver.”

“No, no. Not how they are going to die,” said the lieutenant. “How do you *know* they are going to die?”

“Oh,” said the priest. “That's easy. Because it happens everywhere I go.”

“People die?”

“Yes,” said the priest.

“Everywhere you go?”

“Yes.”

The lieutenant got up. “I’m sorry to take your time Father,” he said as he gathered his things. “Thank you for the, for the...”

“Please don’t leave yet,” Father Juan asked quietly.

“Look, I’m sorry mister or father or whatever your name is, but I don’t have time to deal with cases that don’t exist or murders that might or might not happen. If I chased every nutcase story I’ve heard in the past 10 years, I’d be working from her to eternity.”

The priest got up quickly and blocked the exit. “Please, please, wait. Give me two minutes, Lieutenant. That’s all I ask. After that, if you still feel like I am a nutcase wasting your time you can go with my blessing.”

The two men were loud enough that the other customers in the restaurant stopped their conversations, looking at the priest and the lieutenant. The lieutenant looked around, as if wondering how he could get past the crazy priest without making too much of a scene. After a minute of thought, he set his things on the booth but did not slide in all the way; preferring to crouch with half his butt on the edge. “Okay, funny boy,” he said. “Two minutes. After that, I’m leaving. You got that?”

“Two minutes,” the priest said taking his seat. “And then you can go. I promise.”

The lieutenant relaxed a little. Father Juan took a deep breath and then let it out. “Okay. I know this is going to sound completely crazy but, well, sometime in the very near future a man is going to approach me. I don’t know who the man is. I only know that he will be a bad man, a criminal of some kind. Some are drug dealers, some are murderers, some are just plain sick.”

“Some?” questioned the lieutenant.

“Oh yes, this has happened more than once.”

“More than...,” that stopped the lieutenant cold. He waved his finger in a spinning motion. “Go on, what happens next?”

“The man will approach me and confess.”

“Confess as in make a confession? The religious kind? The sacrament of penance?”

“Something like that Lieutenant,” said the priest, “although sometimes it comes across more like bragging. It depends on the man.”

“Man? Men only?”



“Mostly, yes.”

“What happens next?” said the lieutenant.

“Well... they die.”

“They just die?” said the lieutenant.

“Uh, yes and no,” said the priest. “Some fall down right there on the spot. Some get up, walk away, live for a week. But eventually they die. They always do.”

The lieutenant sat looking at Father Juan. His face passive, thoughtful. “Uh, Father, did you kill these men?”

The priest looked horrified. “No Lieutenant!”

“Does anyone kill these men?”

“No Lieutenant. Not unless you count God.”

“God?” asked the lieutenant. “You are a Catholic priest telling me that God kills them?”

“I am hesitant to say yes but I cannot explain how this happens any other way. Mind you, I am admittedly weak on theology and do not know the church’s official explanation, if they even have one. I just know it’s impossible for it to be true, yet it’s impossible for it to be anything else.”

“Impossible?” asked the lieutenant. “Just exactly how many times has this happened?”

“It’s all in the file, Lieutenant,” said the priest pointing towards the file. “So far, counting Montoya Consuello on Monday, it’s four hundred and eighty-seven times.”

The lieutenant whistled. “Whew! Four hundred and eighty...! That’s a... that’s.... You’re right. That’s impossible.”

“Yes Lieutenant. It’s impossible. It’s also true.”

The lieutenant looked down at the file then picked it up, feeling its heft. “Four hundred and eighty-seven times? Hmm. How many times have you been arrested Father?”

The priest lowered his head in shame. “Forty-two times, Lieutenant.”

“And have you ever been taken to trial?”

“Twice, Lieutenant,” said the Father, head still down. “Both cases ended with acquittals.”

“So you’ve never been convicted, Father? Why not?”

The priest raised his head and flashed the ghost of a smile. “Perhaps the answer is because I am not guilty,” he said. “Both trials were in a town which had already experienced a child molester in the church. I think the DA was trying to spring-board off that but I don’t know for sure. It’s... Well... Politics...”

“So you’ve never been to prison? asked the lieutenant.”

Father Juan shivered, picturing hundreds of evil men, all in a place he could not escape from. “Thankfully no Lieutenant. At least not on that side of the bars.”

“Let me, uh.... Let me....” The lieutenant said while picking up the folder. “Let me have a look at this. Is your number in here?”

“Yes Lieutenant. My contact information is on the first page.”

“Good, Father. Then I’ll be....” The lieutenant trailed off into silence.

“Keep it. Look through it. I learned long ago to keep an extra copy,” said the priest. “Let me know if there is anything I can answer for you. Oh, and thank you for the time.”

“Sure,” said the lieutenant. After a second he asked, “I suppose this means you’ll be calling me?”

The priest looked down. “Unfortunately, yes,” he said.

“I was afraid of that,” said the lieutenant.

Father Juan got up and walked to his car. The lieutenant was already engrossed in the folder. Soon the waitress came back to the table. “I see your friend left, the Father,” she said, a small round tray held in one hand.

The lieutenant grunted. “Humph.”

“Can I get you anything else? Another beer?”

“No,” said the lieutenant, his eyes never leaving the folder. “Thank you.”

The waitress shrugged her shoulders and walked back to the kitchen. Not once did the lieutenant look up to watch her go.

## Chapter 15

*(Friday morning, 12/3)*

Friday morning Father Juan entered the parish feeling fresh and relaxed. His run had taken him further into the surrounding fields and the country side. The white skies and the mile after mile of open spaces covered with living things had proved to be a balm to his soul. Even the ever present weeds fell on his eye with wonder.

The church secretary, Emily Hoffman, greeted him as he arrived. "How did your meeting go?"

"Meeting?" ask the priest. She was the first person he talked to all morning and her presence startled him.

"You know," she said. "The one you had up in Amarillo yesterday."

She pronounced the word Amarillo the Texan way, Am-a-rill-oh. Unlike Lieutenant Dellarosa who had pronounced it the Spanish way, Am-a-ree-oh. For some reason this made Father Juan smile.

"Fine," he said after a moment's distraction. "Fine."

She looked at him, not saying anything. "Um..." he added. "I met with a cop up there, a Lieutenant Dellarosa on the Amarillo homicide squad."

"And...?" she asked in the silence that followed.

"And? Oh... it," he continued, "It went well."

"Good," she said.

"Yes," he said. "Good."

After a pause he asked, "Is there any coffee made? I want to get going on the last of the paper work."

"Sure," she said. "I'll get you a cup."

"No thanks," he responded with a smile. "I know how to get my own. Besides you wouldn't like the way I poison it."

"Poison it?"

"Maybe a better word would be caffeinated candy. At least that's what its like after I get thought with it."

"Not enough sugar and cream in the world, is there?" she asked.

"Nope," he said. "Not near enough."

Feeling light hearted, Father Juan entered his office and started in on his work. Before long his world shrunk down to a pile of papers, his pen and his cup of coffee.

When noon rolled around, Father Jacob had gotten up to go to a lunch meeting. Some of the local farmers had asked him to come and meet with them. As he was leaving he put on his clerical black jacket, instead of his more comfortable grey one. Uh-oh, thought Father Juan. That looks serious. He's wearing his clerics.

Looking around the small kitchen, Father Juan noticed there wasn't much food. Just as he was about to say something, Emily came back into the church carrying a plastic bag of tortillas and without a word handed them to Father Juan. The tortillas were still warm from the pan and the bag was steamed on the inside from their heat. He opened the bag and the aroma of the fresh tortillas filled the room.

"Where did you find these," he asked? "They smell terrific."

"I thought you might like them," she responded. "Señora Espinoza lives up the street and she often makes me some extra tortillas for lunch on Fridays. When I told her the new priest might also be hungry, she tossed in a few more."

"Well," said the priest. "Señora Espinoza has just earned her way into my prayers tonight. Do you suppose that this counts as an indulgence?"

The secretary slapped him on the arm. "You goof, she said. "The tortillas may be good, Father, but I don't think they are good enough to get her into heaven."

"Ah," he replied. "You don't know the power of my prayers." They both laughed.

Father Juan was tempted to eat the still warm tortillas by hand, just like he had as a kid but prudence dictated he find a more civilized approach. Soon the two workers had added some cheese, green onion and chunks of chicken to make thick and messy quesadillas. They ate with delight and not too few napkins.

As they were cleaning up their mess Father Juan spoke. "I noticed there are a lot of Hoffmans out in the cemetery the other day. Family?"

"Heck, Father, this town was practically founded by Hoffmans. My great-

grandfather, Eberhart, was good friends with Father Reisdorff, the priest who founded the town. That was in something like 1902. There have been Hoffmans in this parish ever since.

“Hoffman,” the priest asked? “German name?”

“Ja,” she responded. “A lot of Germans immigrated to America in the early 1900’s. Except for the dry conditions, the surrounding land was close enough to home for poor German farmers. And here they had the chance to spread out. Back home their family farms would go to older brothers or uncles. There was no chance to spread out to move ahead.”

“Lebensraum,” asked the priest?

“Not that kind of spread out, silly,” she said as she hit him with a pot holder.

“I’m still getting over the fact that you know what Lebensraum means,” said the priest.

“I am German you know,” she said.

“Duh,” he said, “only that’s not quite what I meant.”

“Oh,” she said. “That. Well I was born here but didn’t like it here much after high school. So I moved down south to Austin and got me an education at U.T.. That was before title 9, so the team didn’t get much in the way of publicity, at least compared to the football team but I got to be a lady longhorn as well as a swiftette.”

“Okay,” he said. “I am now officially lost. Lady longhorn? Swiftette?”

“A lady longhorn is someone who played sports at U.T. Austin. You know hook’em horns,” she said as she rotated her fist side to side, pinky and thumb extended.

“Uh, is that a fishing thing,” he asked?

“No, silly. Texas Longhorns.”

“Oh. So that explains the longhorn thingy but what about the other one? The Spiffettes? What’s that?”

“It’s Swiftette. As in the diminutive of a swift, which is a female fox.”

“Okay, so you are foxy. I can buy that,” he said with a smile. “But what’s it mean?”

“Mean? You mean you don’t know? You moved to Nazareth and you don’t know what a Swiftette is?”

“I think we already established my ignorance on the topic,” he said, putting

away the dish towel. “And the church isn’t exactly informative when they tell you to move. They just point you to a place on the map and off you go.”

“That doesn’t sound like fun,” she said.

“You have no idea,” he said seriously. “Now stop prevaricating and tell me what a Swiftette is.”

“Prevaricating,” she asked? “You know what prevaricating means but you don’t know what a Swiftette is?”

“Oh yes, the homies and I used to always say prevaricating. Right after we fought the F-14ers and just before we robbed the liquor store.”

“Now who’s joking,” she asked dryly?

“Okay. So I went to school and didn’t fall asleep – at least in every class but biology. For some reason I can’t for the life of me remember what the diminutive form of a female fox has to do with a shit little, sorry, a small town in the Texas panhandle. I must have missed class that day.”

“You don’t have to get snippy,” she said cutting her eyes.

“Snippy? I’m about to get crazy loco on you. Spit it out, chica.”

“Okay, okay. I would hate for you to get crazy loco on anything. Just so you know, the Swiftettes are the local basketball team.”

Father Juan gave a large fake yawn. “Big deal. Some girls tossing a ball around. Is that all they have for entertainment around here?”

“Humph, girls? I’ll have you know this group of *girls* has won more state championships, 17 in all, than any other high school in Texas. Actually in America.”

Father Juan stopped laughing. “You’re kidding, right,” he asked?

“Nope. You’re looking at the point guard who still holds the school record for the most points in a single game.”

Father Juan looked stunned. Then suddenly he let out a huge yell. “Woo-hoo,” he cried! Then he grabbed Emily, and gave her a peck on the cheek.

“What’s that for?” she asked, her hand coming up to touch her cheek as he started to bounce around the kitchen.

“Of all the places the church could have dumped me, they dumped me in the town with the state’s best basketball team,” he shouted!

“And that’s good,” she asked?

“Good? No señorita. That is not good. That is great. That is fantastic!” He stopped bouncing for a second. “This is the best gift I have ever received in my whole life.”

“Okay,” she said. “Now *I’m* officially lost. Why would it matter if there was a basketball team here or not?”

“Oh, Señorita. Don’t you know? There’s life and then there’s basketball. Life is something we all get but basketball... now *that* is a gift from God.”

The priest then ran out into the sanctuary and started playing air basketball. Dribbling an invisible ball, going for the hoop and then letting fly with a monstrous jump and slam dunk. “Boom,” he cried. “Father Juan takes the lead.”

“Father Juan better take some valium before he damages my church,” said a voice from the church’s front door. “I’m not exactly pleased to see you running around like a fool.”

Father Juan stopped. Father Jacob had just come in and he was in a sour mood.

“I’m sorry, reverend Father,” he said. “But I just found out that Nazareth has a first ranked basketball team and... well... I couldn’t contain my enthusiasm.”

“Well, I guess if you’re going to get excited in church the Swiftettes are something to get excited about,” the senior father said with a smile. I’m sorry I was cross.”

“The lunch meeting was that bad,” asked Emily?

“Worse,” said Father Jacob. “Worse.”

Father Jacob walked into the office, his limp made more evident by his distress and immediately got on the phone. Father Juan turned to Emily and asked quietly, “So when do the Swiftettes play next?” His feet were still tapping.

“Tonight, in fact. There’s a big tournament in town over the weekend.”

“Tonight?” Father Juan did a silent arm pump and then jumped and spun in the air, being careful not to land hard on his feet. “Will I see you there,” he asked?

“You better,” she responded. “My daughter’s the team captain.”

## Chapter 16

*(Friday evening, 12/3)*

In a very small town, the local high school is usually not hard to find. In the case of Nazareth, when the Swiftettes are playing, all one has to do is stick their head outside and follow the noise. This was the advice given to Father Juan by Emily Hoffman, Father Jacob and even his landlady when he happened to stop by her house on the way home. After a bit of prayer and study, the game time approached and Father Juan stepped outside. Sure enough faint chanting and cheering was audible from the top of his stairway. It was dusk with the sunset casting a cool glow on the houses and the fields beyond. Father Juan walked along, whistling a tune, hands in his pockets. He had decided to dress in his clerics for the evening, much like a man in the military would show up at public functions in his dress uniform. It made him feel more comfortable – safer. There was a slight breeze. The spring air smelled cool and dry.

As he turned the corner near the school, the noise and the lights marked the area where the crowd gathered. He knew he was at the right spot by the clumps of teenagers hanging out in the shadows, walking along or smoking cigarettes; their jackets protecting them from the cold. From the street, the gymnasium looked safe and sound. Father Juan knew better. He stopped, still in the shadows, feeling a knot in his stomach. He hated crowds. He had since he was a teen. It wasn't agoraphobia. He knew that. Agoraphobia was an unnatural fear of open spaces or large groups. Father Juan's fear was perfectly natural. The social conventions that normally kept one separate from random strangers were not as strict in crowds. If there was a man in there who had committed a mortal sin, Father Juan would know. That man would be drawn to him like a fly to honey and once there, would be compelled to confess. When passing on the street or eating at a restaurant, social conventions were usually enough to curb this compulsion but not so in crowds.

The last time he had been in a large crowd was at a Dodgers game when he had been back in LA to visit some friends and family. A distant relative had bought tickets for the whole family as a surprise gift for Father Juan. He knew he could not turn down the offer without seeming rude, so he went with the family and hoped for the best. A random encounter in the line for the restroom at the top of the third, ended up lasting much longer. While the rest of the family enjoyed the game, he got to hear the confessions of a violent criminal who was so steeped in sin and degradation that it was all Father Juan could do



not to throw up. For well over an hour he heard stories of murder, torture, rape and bloody assault. Each was worse than the last. All hideous enough to turn the stomach of any caring man.

At the top of the ninth, the man had finished, right when the visiting team hit their last home run. While the stadium erupted with noise, Father Juan quietly gave the man his last rights, knowing what would happen to him soon. By then the man had slumped against a dirty stadium support, leaning over and holding his head. He had barely enough energy to breath, let alone speak. Sometimes the penance did that, as if the words themselves deflated the man, leaving nothing behind but an empty shell. When he was finished, Father Juan had treaded heavily back up to his seat in the stands, only to stare stupefied at the people around him. While the rest of he crowd was cheering, Father Juan shivered, picturing all the things he had just heard; wondering how much of it was real, and how much of it bravado. Later he would find out, by happenstance while talking to an LAPD detective that it was real – all too real.

That had been 15 years ago.

Father Juan was torn. He was pretty sure the town was small enough that he would not run into a violent criminal but he didn't know for sure. It was the not knowing he found the hardest to bare. There was no way to protect himself from the pain, from the way a confession turned his guts into a raw pile of nerves. No way to protect his eyes from seeing what the confessor had seen, replaying the pain, the agony, the guilt, the elation. But a man could grow used to anything or so he told himself. After 24 years of confessions, Father Juan should know. He no longer prayed the prayer of Jesus on the cross, "Father, please take this cup from me." He knew that prayer would go unanswered, just as it had for Jesus. What he found hardest to bare was not the sin but the surprise. Having a sunny day turned cold by the words of an evil man. Having to spend yet another night in a jail cell, when you would rather go out to dinner with friends or watching all the hard work for an event at church turn into hour after hour at a police station, answering the same questions over and over.

Sometimes it's the little things in life that save a man. Grace in little tiny packets, like the small specks of rain on a spring day. For Father Juan it was a car which had made a wrong turn and then had to make a u-turn in the middle of the street. For a moment the lights shined fully on the Father while he was standing in the shadows, trying to make up his mind. With the lights on him, he could not stop, as he would be recognized, so without thinking he started for the auditorium. He had gone a few steps when he heard the car's window roll down. "Sorry Father. I didn't see you there." It was an apology from Mrs. Keim. Her tone was respectful, her distress genuine.

Some habits are hard to overcome. Years of being a priest had ingrained several into Father Juan which always came in handy. Automatic kindness was one of them. Without thinking, he stopped and approached the car. “No problem, Mrs. Kiem. In fact, I want to thank you. Coming up like you did helped me make up my mind.”

“Oh really,” she responded smiling up at him out the window. Her large glasses with their ornate holder around her neck, reflected the lights of the gymnasium. “How nice. What did you decide, Father, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Well,” he said with a chuckle. “Silly as it may sound coming from a priest, to trust in God Mrs. Keim. To trust God.”

“Oh, how nice,” she said as the car started to move forward. Her teenaged son was at the wheel, and impatient to get moving. Without looking she gave the boy a slap with a rolled up piece of paper. With a voice like steel she said quietly, “Stifle!” Father Juan wasn’t sure what “stifle” meant but the word had the proper effect or maybe it was the paper. The car stopped obediently, like a dog to heel. “Will we see you inside, Father Juan?” she asked, her voice again like sugar.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” came his response. With a start he realized it was true.

“Then we’ll be seeing you,” she said as the car drove off, leaving Father Juan once again in the dark. Smiling with more hope than he knew he had the right to, he walked up to the gymnasium and entered the crowd, just like any one else.

The first thing that hit Father Juan as he entered the gymnasium was the sound. The cheering from the stands, the squeak of tennis shoes on the wood floor, the thump of the ball bouncing, the ever present mothers yelling at their children, the kids milling around, bragging or telling stories and the sound of everyone in the whole town trying to make themselves heard above the noise. It all mixed together into one large wave crashing and smashing around his ears. At first the sound rooted him to his spot but soon the people coming in from behind and the excitement of the crowd got him moving.

The inside of the gymnasium was large, the ceiling high. The walls looked freshly painted and the aluminum retracting stands looked brand new. Already there was a huge crowd on either side as the bleachers filled up with many people packed in tight next to each other. Father Juan looked for an open space and finally found one near the back, off in the corner. Getting up there, with the

crowd this thick, was a bit of a trick. The uniform, his clerics, or what Father Juan liked to call his “dog collar,” gave him a level of respect. Kind words and a friendly smile did the rest. When he got to his seat, he saw the referee take the middle of the court and blow his whistle. Up until then the two teams had been practicing on either side, warming up, taking practice shots. Now they drifted to either side and huddled around their coaches. Only then did Father Juan notice that the blue and gold of the Swiftettes fans were gathered on the opposite side. He was about to get up and see if he could find a seat over on the other side, although he couldn’t see a single opening from his vantage point when he happened to notice a lot of people sporting blue and gold shirts on his side of the court as well. They were so intermixed with the black and gold from the visiting team that Father Juan assumed seating on only one side wasn’t mandatory.

Later, when the crowd started cheering, he realized the problem. There simply wasn’t enough seats in the small auditorium for all of the home town fans.

The teams cleared off the court, some to their seats, others milled around the middle. The ref tossed a coin, a winner was declared and the players took their positions. The ref stood in the middle for the tip off, tossed the ball straight up and the game was on. For the next 45 minutes, Father Juan sat spellbound as the first half of the game unfolded. He laughed. He cheered. He cried. He yelled encouragement when he thought it would help. He held his breath whenever a Swiftette was at the free-throw line. He even screamed at the ref when he thought there was a bad call. Much of the time he sat but most of the time he stood, as if standing would somehow help the game along. In any other place, such behavior from a priest would have been frowned on but here, it was not only considered helpful, it was encouraged. He had no idea how loud he was being until he heard someone in the crowd yell out, “You tell ‘em Father,” or “Way to go, Father.” By the time the Swiftettes ended the half with a 10 point lead, there was no doubt about who’s side he favored.

During the half time break, Father Juan ambled down the bleachers to get some refreshments. All that cheering had made his throat dry. Tables had been set up around the outskirts of the gymnasium, and supporters from both teams sold snacks and sodas. The tables were mauled with people but the parents working them were kind and efficient. In very little time Father Juan found himself standing off to one side, munching a hotdog and holding a soft drink, either of which he would have gladly shunned in any other setting. The food he knew he could run off but he was glad his money, in some small way, was supporting the team.

People kept passing him, saying hello, slapping him on the back. Some he recognized from church, others he had seen around town or at the store. The local farmers wore their boots, belts and jeans; sporting western style shirts and the ever present cowboy hat. The ladies often dressed nicer, in dresses or blouses and skirts, although jeans with blue and gold t-shirts were also in evidence. People were polite, friendly, courteous to each other and deferential to his collar.

When the girls came out of their locker rooms to warm up for the second half, some of them came up to Father Juan, led by Jade and Lisa. They asked for his blessing, which he was happy to give. Always he added an encouragement, a word of support. "You play some serious defense," or "That was a beautiful 3-pointer, or "Nice hustle on those rebounds." Even a girl from Bushland, the visiting team, approached him. He was treated with respect all around. "I noticed your lay-ups," he told her, "they are text-book perfect." She left with a smile as wide as Texas.

Soon the ref blew his whistle and the last of the stragglers took to the stands. Father Juan made his way back up to his seat, this time with much more support from the crowd. As he sat down he noticed Antonio and Lupé Alvarez sitting right behind the Swiftette's coach. Father Juan also noticed that the surrounding crowd treated him with respect. Always polite to him and careful to say hello or shake his hand. Seated next to Antonio was coach Doyle which made some kind of sense, since they worked together. The two men were involved in some kind of animated discussion while they were watching the game. Coach Doyle's face had red points on the cheeks and he kept raising his arms forcefully. For his part, Alvarez sat turned slightly away with his arms tightly locked across his chest, his reaction clear from the other side of the stadium. Doyle was obviously trying to tell Alvarez something and it was equally as obvious the man was not interested.

Something about this impression, however, didn't quite make sense. It was later in the half when he looked again at that spot that he realized why. Alvarez was now gone, yet his seat, really just a space on the bleachers was left open. The men around the open seat still noticed Lupé, tracking her movements out of the corners of their eyes in the same way that seagulls will automatically turn to face into the wind when it changes but the respect he had witnessed before, like the man, was gone. With Alvarez gone, Father Juan also noticed something else he hadn't seen before. It was an old woman, small and frail, self-effacing and shy. She must have been seated right next to the Antonio, (his mother? his grandmother?) yet he had over-looked her three times. No wonder, he thought, anyone would be hard pressed to be noticed next to those two. Then he

remembered the old woman from the wedding – the strange one.

A blow from the ref's whistle interrupted Father Juan's reverie. The second half had started in earnest and in all the excitement he never noticed the little grandmother again, except for one time, early on, when their eyes locked. Even from that distance he felt a spark go through him, like something cold and malevolent had touched him; something dangerous, something best left alone. The moment was over quickly and then, in the play of the game, easily overlooked, as if it had never happened.

It was exactly as it was intended to be.

The game ended with a decisive 69-58 victory for the Swiftettes. The tournament didn't count as conference play but it gave the team some much needed experience out of conference which would come in handy if they made it to the state playoffs. After the game, Father Juan let the crowd take him out the main doors and back into the night air. It was only as he was almost out the door that he noticed a small plaque off to the sides of the stands. It read:

*This gymnasium was made possible  
by the kind donation of  
Antonio and Lupé Alvarez.*

Well, thought Father Juan to himself. That explains the respect.

## Chapter 17

*(Saturday morning, 12/4)*

The next morning Father Juan got up and did his morning prayers. Saturdays were often a day off for a junior priest but Father Juan had come up with an idea while walking home from the basketball game last night and wanted to run it by Father Jacob.

Instead of his usual clerics, Father Juan put on a pair of jeans, a t-shirt and a heavy sweatshirt against the morning chill. He skipped the sanctuary, walking

instead over to the back of the parsonage. He knew the senior priest liked to work on engines every Saturday morning and this day was no exception. In the open garage he found Father Jacob hard at work on another big engine. This one a giant radial with two rows of almost twenty cylinders arranged in a circle, pointing out from a central hub. The entire thing was nearly 5 feet across and held off the ground by a massive engine mount. In the background a radio was playing some kind of music that sounded to Father Juan like a cross between country dance music and polka.

“I’ll bet that weighs a ton,” Father Juan said by way of greeting.

Father Jacob looked up and smiled. Then he walked over to the back wall and turned down the radio. “Sorry,” he said. “I like to have a distraction while I work.”

“I said that looks like it weighs a ton,” said Father Juan.

“Twenty-four hundred pounds to be exact,” said the senior priest, casually resting a hand on one of the cylinders. “You’re looking at a Pratt & Whitney R-2800 – one of the better radials to come out of the war. Add the right fuel and the proper water injectors and this baby puts out an even twenty-eight hundred horsepower or at least it will again when I’m done with it.”

“What’s it to?”

“This one came out of an old Martin 4-0-4, an early twin engine airliner. But it’s going to be replacing the rusted piece of junk they pulled out of a F6F Hellcat a buddy of mine is rebuilding. So I have to not only rebuild it, which includes reconditioning many of the parts. I also have to rework the mounts on some of the parts so they will work in the much smaller nose of the ‘Cat.’”

“And this is fun?”

“It sure beats drowning worms or watching football or whatever it is that other priests do in their spare time.”

“Well, that is something I can agree on,” said Father Juan.

Father Jacob peeled off a pair of thin plastic gloves he used to protect his hands and walked over to the rear work bench again. “I’m pretty sure you didn’t come over here to talk engines, so why don’t we step into the parsonage and have a cup of coffee.

Father Juan followed the senior priest inside and helped himself to the coffee as the older man washed his hands at the sink. While Father Jacob was walking back to the table, Father Juan noticed his limp again.

“Say. You never told me how you got that limp, anyways.”

“This old thing?” the senior priest said pointing at his right leg. “It's just a bent landing gear. It happens to all us old timers after a while.”

“Sure,” said Father Juan, “but that’s not what I heard. Someone in the parish said you tried to land a plane in a tree once and didn’t do so well on the final stop.”

“Well,” said the senior priest with a smile. “That’s not too far from what happened. The truth is,” he said after taking a careful sip of coffee, “I had an engine failure while doing my rounds. I had just come back from a lumber camp and was on my way back to Anchorage, when the engine coughed and sputtered while I was half way home. There was nothing but trees underneath me. What with being over a forest and all I was all out of flat spots to land in. Back in those days the church didn’t have the budget for a full time pilot, so in the summer I flew myself. A lucky thing too. If I had crashed in the winter, I wouldn’t be sitting here sipping coffee, let me tell you.”

“So what’d you do?”

“Crashed and crashed hard. I bounced around in that plane like the biggest pinball in game history, cursing and screaming the whole time. It was pretty scary, let me tell you. After what seemed like hours of this, I ended up Tango Uniform and fifteen feet off the ground.”

“Tango Uniform?”

“Tango Uniform is military speak for T.U. or tits up. What anyone else would call upside down.”

“Wow.”

“Wow is right,” he continued. “Sometimes in the middle of all that the stick had slapped across and busted my left arm and the dash had slammed into my right knee breaking my leg in three places. Worse still, the part of dash that hit my knee happened to be the only working radio. The only part of the interior, I might add, that was damaged. In one blow I had turned a couple of hundred dollars of fine quality aviation equipment into so much electronic junk. Most of it was lying on the roof below me like a pile of sharp rocks. Of course I didn’t discover that until I cut myself out of the seatbelt and landed face first into the mess. ”

“Ouch.”

“Ouch is right. With the radio busted and dark coming, I had to find a way out and do it quick. That nice little forest is also good bear country and the bears they keep are not exactly pets.”

“So what did you do?”

“Two things. I walked home...”

“...You walked home?”

“Made a crutch first. Thanks to my excellent piloting skills,” he said dryly, “there was plenty of extra timber laying on the ground. I made a splint out of an old pair of jeans and a few small branches, carved a crude crutch out of a broken limb, loaded up every bit of food I could carry, which wasn’t much and then started hobbling home.”

“But that was the first thing I did. The second thing I did when they let me out of the hospital – two months later and 20 pounds lighter – was to walk over to the mechanic who had ”rebuilt” that airplane engine and smacked him upside the head with the nearest thing I could find. Lucky for him it was a padded torque wrench and not a ball peen hammer.”

“You hit the man?” asked Father Juan, surprise evident in his voice.

“Yes I did. Didn’t make me friends with the Bishop either. He thought I would get arrested or something but the local law enforcement had a different view. See they discovered my plane and pulled out the parts they could. One of the things they discovered was that the engine had been rebuilt so poorly that it was only a matter of hours until it would fail. Around here such incompetence might be seen as an inconvenience but up there, with nothing but miles and miles of open spaces, such a mistake was tantamount to attempted murder. I was lucky to have crashed close enough that it only took me a week to walk home. Had the engine died 15 minutes sooner, it would have been murder.”

“Wow. I had no idea things were so rough up there.”

“Oh, it's not bad anymore. The Bishop soon found the room in his budget for a full time pilot and I learned to never again fly a plane when someone else worked on the engine – that, and to always carry a spare radio.”

Father Juan chuckled at this and then quietly sipped his coffee, thinking.

“But you didn’t come here,” said the senior priest, “to hear my old war stories, did you?”

Father Juan shook his head. “No, Father, I didn’t.”

“Remember,” Father Juan continued, “when you asked me if I could help with the Latinos coming here – making them feel more at home at Holy Family?”

Father Jacob nodded a gleam in his eye. “Yes.”

“Well I had the most interesting idea last night...”



## Chapter 18

(Sunday, 12/5)

The beginning of the liturgical year in the Catholic Church starts with Advent which is a time of preparation for the coming of Christ at Christmas. Advent is similar to Lent, sometimes called the little lent, as it is a time of repentance with prayer, fasting and confession. Advent begins four Sundays prior to Christmas. Each Sunday and some of the days in between have a spiritual significance. The third Sunday of Advent is Gaudete Sunday, a name that comes from the introit for the traditional Latin mass which starts with "*Gaudete in Domino Semper*" (Rejoice in the Lord always). Gaudete marks the half way point in advent and is a time of rejoicing because the difficult struggle of fasting and prayer is half-way done. Like Father Juan had once heard humorously spoken from the pulpit, "We've reached the top and its all downhill from here on in."

Gaudete is sometimes celebrated differently than the other Sundays of Advent. It often depends upon the parish or the priest. At Holy Family, Gaudete was seen as a significant day and was celebrated with more enthusiasm than the other Sundays of advent. Father Jacob wore special rose-colored vestments instead of the traditional violet ones use throughout advent and the altar servers had matching rose surplices. The inside of the sanctuary was given over to a splash of rose with special rose-colored curtains over the side windows. A rose lace shawl was hung over the shoulders of the Madonna in the side-altar and even a special rose-colored silk pall for the altar. There were even matching rose-colored satin tablecloths set on all the tables in the back hall. The workmanship on all these pieces was spectacular, hand sewn with wonderful skill. The only problem was they were all done by the prickly Mrs. Keim. This was her great pride in the church and she sat on the decorating committee like it was her personal fiefdom. To get anything done, Father Jacob had warned he would have to go through her.

Father Juan's problem was that on this particular year Gaudete also happened to fall on another Catholic holiday, Our Lady of Guadalupe Day, which marks the anniversary of the second visit of the Virgin Mary to Juan Diego in 1531. For Mexican Catholics this is the most holiest of holidays and the shrine to the

Virgin of Guadalupe is packed beyond full every year on this date in December.

The problem Father Juan foresaw was that the parish of Holy Family did not emphasize the importance of Our Lady of Guadalupe Day and would likely forget it in their celebration for Gaudete. In fact, Father Jacob had thought of celebrating Our Lady of Guadalupe for the evening Mass and reserving the more popular Gaudete for the morning Mass. Father Juan, however, had a different idea.

“Why don’t we combine the two holidays?” He asked Father Jacob on that Saturday morning. If Gaudete is a time of celebration then what better reason to celebrate than a vision of the Madonna?”

Father Jacob had seen the wisdom of this and agreed right away. The only problem was that it left only eight days to plan and prepare for a whole new service and right in the middle of advent which was already a busy time for the staff.

And it meant dealing with Mrs. Keim.

Having the senior father’s blessing, but not knowing where to start, Father Juan decided to start with his fall-back position; prayer. Twenty minutes later, he was interrupted from his prayer in front of the altar by the sound of rapid Spanish being spoken in the back hall.

“Hush, now baby,” a woman urged her child. “Let’s find your little bear and we can go home.”

“Are you sure it’s here mommy,” said a little voice, also in Spanish?

“Si, baby. It’s here. Don’t you worry.”

Father Juan got up and started walking towards the back hall. Normally, the main door from the back hall to the sanctuary was left closed but for some reason it was open this afternoon. As he was passing the next to the last pew Father Juan noticed something white sitting on the cushion. It was a stuffed bear, a frilly thing with big eyes, a white dress and the white toe shoes of a ballerina. Its long braided hair was held with pink bows. He picked it up and carried it into the open doorway.

In the hall was a middle aged woman with thick dark hair, touched with a few streaks of silvery grey. She was wearing serviceable jeans and a light jacket

against the chill of the early December afternoon. Her dark skin matched that of the little girl next to her who looked to be about four or five and wore a white dress that was frayed and dirty on the hem. The girl held a pair of white slippers in her hand which were also worn and dirty from use while her feet and legs were bare. The girl's dark hair was held back in two long braids across her back, pink ribbons tied to the ends. The two were searching down low under the tables and chairs of the hall. One glance at the girl and Father Juan knew why they came. The priest carefully hid the stuffed bear behind his back before speaking.

"Con permiso, Señora y señorita," Father Juan said formally.

The woman and the girl were startled at his voice. They were so engrossed with their search that they hadn't heard him step into the doorway.

"Oh," the woman cooed in surprise and quickly grabbed the girl's hand and marched her before the priest. "Buenos Dias, Padre," she said with a curtsy. She continued in Spanish, "Please forgive us for the interruption."

"It was no interruption, Señora," the priest replied in Spanish with a slight bow. "I am always pleased to entertain angels in our humble parish."

The woman waved her hand, "We're no angels," she insisted but she also smiled at the compliment. The little girl laughed.

"You're not angels?" the priest asked. "Are you sure? *This* one," he said while touching the little girl on the nose, "is pretty enough to pass for one."

"Oh, she's pretty enough," said the woman, "but she is no angel. Believe me."

"Hmm," said the priest still addressing the little girl. "Are you sure you're not an angel?"

The girl giggled. "He's silly, Abuela."

The priest continued, "Well if you're not angels you are at least the answer to my prayers. Perhaps I can help to answer yours in return." Father Juan bent down low so his face was the same height as the girl's. Still holding the doll behind his back he asked in a whisper, "Did you perhaps loose something here, chica?"

"Si, Padre." The girl replied. "I lost Teri, my dancing bear."

"Does Teri have a pretty white dress?" The priest asked.

"Si."

"And does Teri have pink ribbons in her hair?"

“Si.”

“Hmm,” said the priest. “Does this bear also happen to have toe shoes?”

The girl brightened at this. “Oh, si, Padre, she does. She is the best dancer in the whole world!”

“The best?” asked the priest.

“The very best, padre,” the girl answered.

“And you say she is lost?”

“Si, padre. Mommy says I left her here last night. I’m so worried for her. She is all alone. She needs me. We simply must find her.”

“Well then,” Father Juan said. “This sounds serious. Tell you what, little angel, I think I have a way to find your Teri but I need your help. Can you help me?”

“Si, padre,” the girl said earnestly.

“Excellent,” said the priest. “Why don’t you hold out your hands and close your eyes. You do that and we’ll see if we can’t find her.”

“How will closing my eyes find her,” the girl asked?

“Very simple,” said the priest, thinking quickly. “Every one knows a stuffed bear, even the very best dancer in the whole world, cannot dance if someone is looking at her. Right?”

The girl nodded her head.

“Well, then, if we all close our eyes, Teri can dance, right?”

The girl thought this out then nodded quickly.

“So if we keep our eyes closed tight and call her name I’m sure she can dance right to us. Si?”

The girl cocked her head to one side in thought. After a moment she nodded enthusiastically.

“Good, said Father Juan. “Are you ready?”

In answer, the girl closed her eyes and bravely stuck out her arms.

“Are you sure your eyes are closed tight,” the priest asked? The girl swayed as she scrunched her face in an effort to keep her eyes tightly closed. “Good,” said the priest. “I’m searching all around and a round and around. Teri, Teri, where are you?”

They all began calling the bear’s name. “Teri. Teri.”

“Wait a minute,” asked the priest? “What is that?”

The girl started to open her eyes.

“Don’t look,” he said quickly.

The girl tightened her eyes again.

“I think I hear her. It sounds like, like little feet. Like little feet dancing. Do you think it's her?”

The girl nodded her head rapidly, shaking in anticipation, afraid to open her eyes.

“Wait. It's getting louder. She must be getting closer. Do you hear her? I think she’s really close. She’s...”

Just then the priest dropped the doll in the girl arms.

“Teresita!” the girl shrieked. “You’re back.” She jumped up and down in happiness, and started dancing with her doll.

The older woman whispered as Father Juan stood up, “You found it?”

“Si,” he replied quietly. “It was on one of the pews. She must have left it there.”

“Ah,” the woman said. “At the meeting last night she wandered into the sanctuary to nap on the pews. We must have left it there when we carried her to the car.”

“Meeting?” Father Juan asked.

“Si,” said the woman. “There was a short meeting about next Sunday. My daughter tried to meet with Mrs. Keim to show her a dress but she was too busy then.”

“Your daughter...” Father Juan said. “I’m sorry, but I just realized I don’t know your name?”

“Oh,” said the woman. “I am Ester Espinoza.”

“Señora Espinoza?” the priest asked.

“Si.”

“*The* Señora Espinoza, the one who made the incredible tortillas for Señora Hoffman?”

“Si.”

“Well then,” said the priest. “It is indeed an honor to meet you. Those tortillas were muy delicioso.”

“Thank you padre.”

“No, thank you,” said the priest.

Just then Father Juan noticed that Señora Espinoza held a white dress carefully wrapped in plastic over one arm. “Is this the dress,” he asked? “May I see it?”

“Si” Señora Espinoza said as she gently passed it over. The dress was small and white with frills and lace all over the top half. He took a closer look and noticed the needlework was small and precise – very precise. The color was very bright, a kind of white one rarely saw in clothing that has been washed. The dress was a style Father Juan had seen in history books but never in person. Handing it back he asked, “I’ve never seen a dress quite like this. Is the style very old?”

“Si, padre. The dress has been in my family for six generations.”

“Six generations,” said the priest. “But it’s so white! It looks brand new.”

“Si, padre. My great grandmother told me her mother wore it the day she met Teresita Urrea, the Saint of Sinaloa. She is said to have done a nice deed for the saint and in return Santa Teresita blessed her. Ever since then, the girls in my family have worn this dress on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe and it has always brought us great luck.”

“Well that is a remarkable story,” Father Juan said, “and a great blessing. But how do you keep it so white? I have never seen fabric last so long without fading.”

“That is the thing, padre. I have washed this dress many times, as did my mother, and her mother before her. Never once has it faded. Truly it is a miracle.”

“Truly,” said the priest. “But why did you wish to show this to Señora Keim?”

“Oh, It’s the ribbon on the sleeves. You see, my grandmother decided to add rose ribbon on the sleeves in honor of the miracle of Our Lady but those ribbons were not on the original dress and have not faired as well.”

As she spoke, Señora Espinoza opened the plastic and showed Father Juan the ribbons. They were obviously faded and weathered. They stood out against the brightness of the dress like a stain.

“Well,” the priest said, “I can see why you would want to fix that.”

“I was hoping my granddaughter could wear it this Sunday and be the seventh girl in the family to have that honor. Only you can see the dress needs

mending – expert mending. That was why I was hoping Señora Keim could help us as...”

“Ah...” said the priest. “I understand. And, I think I know a way to fix this. Can you meet me here just before mass tonight? With the dress, I mean? I have a plan.”

## Chapter 19

That evening Father Juan was in the back hall a full hour before mass. Señora Espinoza arrived about 20 minutes later. She and Father Juan enjoyed a quite conversation as the parish slowly came to life for the evening mass. Not much later Mrs. Keim showed up with her family. She was wearing a simple lavender dress with a white collar and a string of small pearls. A pair of dark rimmed reading glasses also hung around her neck by an ornate holder. Her short dark hair and strong jaw gave her a hard look but her eyes, when she saw Father Juan, seemed to lighten and an honest smile hinted at the edges of her thin lips.

“Good evening, Father,” she said.

“Good evening Mrs. Keim,” he replied. “I’m so glad you arrived. I could use your expertise.”

Mrs. Keim stopped in the doorway and raised an eyebrow in interest. “My expertise,” she asked?

“Oh yes,” replied the priest. “Although I hate to intrude...” he said as he indicated her family behind her.

She waved a hand at her husband and son, “Oh I think the boys can find their seats without a problem. What can I do for you?”

Father Juan drew her aside from the open door. “It concerns a bit of needle work that needs to be done – delicate work.”

“Well I do have some experience in that area,” she said.

“Forgive me, Mrs. Keim but you are being too modest. Father Jacob was kind enough to show me the parish decorations for Gaudete. Even a simple man such as me could tell the quality of the stitching was exceptional.”

Mrs. Keim raised a hand to smooth the hair over her ear and a slight flush came to her cheek. "Well... I do try my best," she said.

"Of course you do," said the priest smoothly, "which is why I wanted to ask your opinion on something. You see, a friend of mine approached me with a dress which has been handed down in her family for well over 100 years. Needless to say, the value of the dress to her is inestimable."

Father Juan paused while Mrs. Keim raised her eyebrow. "Go on," she said.

"Well, my friend needed some work done on the dress," continued the priest, "hand sewing to match the original work. I was hoping you might recommend a person to do the work."

Mrs. Keim's jaw started to set. "I don't know, Father. I'm not a seamstress."

"Of course you're not," said the priest. "You're much too good for that. Let me at least show you the dress and you can tell me what you think?"

"Okay," she said, but her tone had already turned cold.

Father Juan waved to Señora Espinoza who was watching them from a discrete distance. As they approached, Father Juan introduced her, "Mrs. Keim, this is Mrs. Espinoza." Señora Espinoza gave a slight bow while holding the dress over one arm.

"Hello," she said, her tone flat.

"Buenas noches," Señora Espinoza replied.

Father Juan quickly collected the dress and handed it to Mrs. Keim. The older lady held it up casually at first, as if it was a chore to be endured. She looked at it then looked again.

"This dress," she said, holding the clear plastic between her hands, "is obviously brand new. Look at the color. Why it's never been washed."

"Forgive me, señora," said Señora Espinoza, "but looks can sometimes be deceiving. This dress has been washed many times."

"How do you know?" replied Mrs. Keim, the challenge evident in her tone.

"Because I did it myself with my own hands, señora, many times."

Mrs. Keim set her jaw and was about to respond when Father Juan interrupted. "Please, Mrs. Keim. Look at the ribbon on the sleeves."

Mrs. Keim glanced to either sleeve and then looked again. Finally she angrily transferred the dress to one hand while she took the glasses from around her neck and placed them on her nose. Then she held the dress up to her face,



tilting her head to one side to get better light. Father Juan and Señora Espinoza watched quietly as she did a double take, surprise evident on her face.

“This is not right,” said Mrs. Keim speaking to no one in particular. “The ribbon is obviously aged and the stitching on it is just as old but the dress itself doesn’t look worn. In fact, it looks brand new. Only... only that can’t be right either. Look at this needle work,” she said holding the dress up to Señora Espinoza as if it were evidence to convict her. “It’s very old. This dress was hand made. There’s not a single machine stitch on it, yet...”

“Yet it looks brand new?” suggested Señora Espinoza.

“Yes. It looks brand new,” said Mrs. Keim looking at Señora Espinoza as if for the first time. “Its looks brand new but it cannot be.”

“Yes,” said Señora Espinoza.

“Even this ribbon, the stitching on it,” she said pulling the edge back to expose the unweathered seam. “Look at the color there. That’s what it must have looked like when it was new. Why I haven’t seen ribbon like this in years. It must be 50 years old, if not older. They don’t even make the machines that do this kind of edging anymore. That’s how I know it’s old. And the fabric of the dress, the way it’s woven... you can see the imperfections of the thread. I don’t think you could even find anything like this thread anymore. They just don’t make it this rough.”

Finally, Mrs. Keim looked up from the dress and peered at Señora Espinoza over her glasses. “I’m sorry,” she said. “What did you say your name was?”

“Señora Espinoza,” the other woman answered. “Esther.”

“Well, Esther. What you have here is the darndest thing I ever saw.”

“Si,” said Señora Espinoza in agreement. “It is a miracle.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Keim nodding in agreement. “A miracle.”

“The dress you are holding,” continued Señora Espinoza, “has been in my family for six generations, well over 100 years. And it has been this white and unblemished as it was the day it was blessed by Saint Teresita.”

At these words shock went through Mrs. Keim. “Touched by a saint,” she said in awe. She looked at the dress again, holding it tenderly, seeing it now if for the first time. “Touched by a saint... Oh Esther. How lovely. How, oh thank you for showing this to me. It, it really means a lot.”

“Your welcome,” said Esther Espinoza gracefully. She looked over to Father Juan who was standing to the side with a huge grin on his face. He winked at

her when she caught his eye, a movement that Mrs. Keim missed as she cradled the dress.

“So,” said Father Juan, breaking the spell. “Señora Espinoza was looking to have some new ribbon attached to the dress, rose-colored in honor of Gaudete but she did not know whom to trust with such a valuable dress.”

Mrs. Keim looked up. “I’m sorry father. What did you say?”

Father Juan smiled. “The dress, it needs new ribbon. Is there anyone who can do this kind of sewing? It’s very precise. Can you suggest someone? Maybe someone in Amarillio...”

Mrs. Keim clutched the dress to her chest protectively. “Amarillo,” she said? “Don’t be ridiculous. There’s no one in a thousand miles who can do this kind of work. I wouldn’t think of it. No, the dress stays with me.”

She turned to Señora Espinoza. “Oh Esther. I have just the thing. My grandmother left me some ribbon from when she came here to America as a girl. It was made in Germany and it was very old even then. The family legend is that the Pope himself used it for Gaudete hundreds of years ago. I’ve had it locked up tight in a safe place hoping to one day find a dress worthy of it and now I have.”

“Señora,” cried Señora Espinoza. “I couldn’t think of such a thing! That is much too kind. I cannot take something of such value to your family. I must insist.”

“Nonsense,” said the older woman, the tightness of her jaw suddenly back. “I have decided. That settles it.” Her tone was brusque but Father Juan noticed that there were tears in her eyes. “Such a fine dress,” she continued, “needs more than just ribbons. I just don’t know what else. Hmm.”

Esther Espinoza leaned in towards the older woman. “You know,” she said in a conspiratorial tone, “my grandmother taught me some things she used to do for the Feast of Our Lady. My hand is not as practiced but maybe with your help, Señora Keim...”

Mrs. Keim linked arms with her. “Wendy. Call me Wendy, Esther,” she ordered as she lead the younger woman towards the sanctuary. “I have a feeling I’m going to want to hear all of your grandmother’s ideas.”

Father Juan smiled and then crossed himself. “Thank you gracious Lord, he said under his breath before letting out a sigh. With a smile and a bounce in his step, he went into the sanctuary. Mass would start soon. It was time to start the service.

## Chapter 20

*(Sunday, 12/12)*

On the following Sunday the parish was packed for the morning mass. It was so full they had to set up benches in the back hall, and communion took 10 minutes longer than expected. Nobody cared, no one complained. Over the past week the sanctuary had been transformed. Splashes of rose colored fabric tastefully adorned the walls, and the altar, while little hand sewn roses were carefully strewn about the parish. The baptistry was covered with little candle holders that Misses Keim called votives, but Señora Espinoza insisted were milagros. Each milagros held a scene, or told a story. No two were the same. Best of all, on the side altar to the virgin someone had laid 40 pink roses. Roses in mid December! The effect of the flowers, especially on the hispanic members was astonishing. Father Juan had heard "it's a miracle" exclaimed in Spanish more than once. Even the more sober German members of the parish were pleasantly surprised at the change to the sanctuary. Many people commented on how lovely the church looked, and everyone seemed to think this Mass had been a special one.

Father Juan had also heard some other things spoken quietly in Spanish, when people thought he wasn't around. These whispers were a little more disturbing, but the priest did not know what to do about them. He set them aside in his head, reserving them later for prayer.

Father Juan had worked hard with Father Jacob on the ceremony for the mass, adding sections, in both English and Spanish to explain conjoined holidays, and even had a few lay members come forward and explain in their own words why they liked Gaudete or the Feast Day of Our Lady. As Father Juan had realized when walking home after the basketball game, both holidays were ones of rejoicing and celebration for the faithful. Why not rejoice together? And that is exactly what they did. Rejoice.

Now, after the service, the church has slowly emptied out until only the two priests and Emily Hoffman were left. Father Jacob's leg was bothering him so he had taken up a chair in the back hall, near the kitchen. Father Juan has slumped into the one next to his, after making sure the last members had left the

parking lot. Misses Hoffman showed up with a half pot of coffee, three mugs, and some cream and sugar. Without a sound the three poured their coffee, and carefully flavored them to taste; sipping slowly, holding their mugs with both hands to warm them against the chill of the outside air.

“Now that,” said the senior father, “was a well done mass. I haven’t seen the sanctuary that full ever. Did you get the head count yet Misses Hoffman?”

Emily had a neat pile of papers next to her. Without moving too much, she moved some aside until she found the form she was looking for. “It looks like 147, Father. I’ll have to double check.”

“Wow! 147. On Gaudete?” said Father Jacob. “And the offering?”

“Hum,” said Emily as she searched for the proper form. “It looks like quite a bit. Say twice what we pulled in last Sunday. I’ll have to recount the cash, but I think we just beat out last Easter as our top collection day.”

“Whoo eee!” said the senior father. “Off the top of my head, I would say your Gaudete/Or Lady celebration was a hit, Father Juan,” he said as he reached over and patted Father Juan on the shoulder. “Good job father. Well done.”

Father Juan bowed his head and smiled. He was too tired to protest. He knew that most of the work had been done by Ester Espinoza and Wendy Keim. The two ladies had worked together, alternating pushing each other, and tag-teaming up against other members who got in their way. They had wanted to get the sanctuary “just right,” and from all appearance, they had done exactly that. During the week Wendy Keim had a constant set of running questions about the Our Lady celebration, “Why do you do that? Why roses? Why milagros? Why why why?” Father Juan had thought he was going to go crazy with her questions, until he realized that she was the perfect measure for the congregation. If she didn’t know something, then there was a good chance neither did the rest of the parish. Suddenly, he realized that in answering her questions, what he was really doing was writing the ceremony. Wendy Keim also turned out to be the parish expert on Gaudete, offering better and more complete answers to Ester Espinoza’s questions than Father Juan received even in seminary.

Still the best part of the ceremony for Father Juan had come afterwards when everyone was leaving, and Misses Keim approached him. “What a wonderful service,” she had said. “I had no idea Our Lady of Guadalupe was so important to the church. Thank you Father.” Father Juan was still enjoying the glow from her thank you.

“Honestly, Father,” the junior priest said, “I really didn’t do all that much.

Most of what I did was get out of the way. But you know what I want to know,” Father Juan continued, changing topics, “is who got the roses? That was a nice touch.” He looked over to the church secretary. “Do you know, Misses Hoffman?”

Emily looked up from her coffee. “Yes,” she said.

After a moment of silence, Father Juan asked, “Let me guess. You know, but you’re not going to tell.”

“Exactly,” she said showing her smile to let the priests know she wasn’t trying to be mean. “I was specifically asked *not* to tell you two.”

“Sacrilege,” laughed Father Jacob. “Not telling the master of his own house. Why there ought to be a court of inquisition! Quick, Father Juan, rush to the basement, and brake out the thumb screws. There’s not a moment to lose!”

Emily and Father Jacob laughed and laughed.

“Alvarez,” Father Juan said quietly.

“What’s that?” asked Father Jacob after the laughter subsided.

“It was Alvarez,” said Father Juan. He looked over at Emily as he said this, and noticed she gave a flinch at the name. A slight twitch of the eyes. It was enough.

“Do you really think,” said the senior priest?

“Naw,” said Father Juan. “I was just guessing. Alvarez is too obvious. It was probably someone else.” As he said this, he saw Emily relaxed a little. Good, he thought to himself. But why would Alvarez care if the priests knew he provided the roses? They must have cost a fortune to fly in, and the priests were obviously pleased, so why would he care? Something didn’t make sense.

*(Sunday evening, 12/12)*

That night, Father Juan walked back to his little apartment exhausted and happy. So much had happened over the past week that he needed to contemplate but he was simply too tired to think. He turned on the TV, popped open a beer and sat down heavily in his reading chair. He tried to find the Lakers-Nets game but it was not being covered by any station. A middling east-coast team like the Nets didn’t get airtime in sport savvy Texas. Instead he comforted himself with an ESPN sports show catching the highlights of all the

games played that day, letting the past week slowly slip off his shoulders.

He was just about to fall asleep when the phone rang. Without stretching too far, he was able to slowly lean over and pick up the receiver. "Hello," he said clumsily shuffling the phone to his ear.

"Hola, Mijo," came the voice from the other end.

"Hola Tia," Father Juan said in a tired happy voice.

"So," she said.

"So?"

"Are you going to tell me how it went, Mijo, or do I have to come over there and beat it out of you?"

"The service?" he asked, still a little groggy.

"Si, Mijo. What else did you think I called about? The Lakers game? Of course the service. Last time we talked you were telling me about some old bitty in your parish you were thinking of strangling. Did you actually resort to violence or did you wimp out again like last time?"

Father Juan found himself laughing at her teasing. "I said that?" he asked with disbelief in his voice.

"Oh, not in so many words, Mijo but it sure sounded like it from your tone. You sure were frustrated about dealing with her, that's for sure."

"I was?" said Father Juan. He thought for a moment then continued, "You know, I guess you're right. I was upset about confronting Mrs. Keim wasn't I?" He let slip a small laugh at his own fear.

"Well?" came the voice on the other end.

"Oh, sorry Tia. I just was thinking. The service went well, better than I thought. Better than expected, quite a bit better. I'm not sure but I think the mass set an attendance record for the parish. That's how well it went."

"Really? Oh congratulations, Mijo, how wonderful for you."

"Thanks Tia but I really don't deserve the credit. Most of the work was done by Señora Espinoza and Señora Keim. I just did my best to get out of their way and let the service happen."

"Señora Keim helped you?" She asked in disbelief. "I thought she was the one you were going to have trouble with."

"So did I," said Father Juan. "So did I. Then I ran across Señora Espinoza while I was praying, actually, and then the next thing I knew the two of them were

planning the service for me.”

“Just like that,” she said as she snapped her fingers?

“Well not quite that easy but close. Remember how you are always telling me that everyone has a love hook. How if you can find their hook then you can help them to love more?”

“Si, Mijo. It is one of the true things about people I learned from Father Sebastian many years ago.”

“Well, by accident, I found out Señora Keim’s love hook. It was sewing, of all things. Fine needle work. Her stitching is wonderfully exacting and clean, a sight to see.”

“Are you teasing me, Mijo?” Patty Pérez said. “You know how I feel about sewing.”

“Yes, Tia. I know how you feel. It's not my fault some of the arts escape you.”

“So it’s art now, is it?” She responded. “Next thing you’ll be telling me is that needlepoint is an olympic sport.”

“It isn’t?” teased the priest.

“See. See!” she said in mock indignation.

“Relax, Tia. I said needlework, not needlepoint. There’s a difference you know.”

“Oh,” she said. “I must have misunderstood. I thought you were going to tell me about another crossed stitched pillow with praying hands on them.”

“Oh gac! Now you’ve just spoiled my appetite.”

“So it wasn’t that?”

“Oh no, not at all. Like I said she does fine needle work. She hand sews things in such a way that they look better than done on a machine. It's hard to describe but when you see a piece done by her, it looks like it was done right, natural perfect, almost like an art. In fact I would call it art but I think she would probably be offended by the term.”

“They don’t like artists there?” she asked.

“Not if they call it art. Call it a craft, now, and then it’s respectable. But call it art and they expect long-haired, anti-social, drug-taking, heathens. You know, Californians.”

“Touché,” she said.”

“Where was I?” said the priest. “Oh yes. She loves to sew. It is her passion, her love hook. Only I didn’t know this, then. I just knew she could sew exceptionally well. So when Señora Espinoza showed up with an antique dress, I thought to show it to Señora Keim just to see what she thought. One look at the dress and she was hooked.”

“By a dress?”

“Well it's more than just a dress,” Father Juan said. Then told her about the dress and how it came to be a miracle. By the end Patty Pérez was as anxious to see the dress as Wendy Keim had been to sew on it.

“Well,” she said, “that explains how you were able to go around her. It sounds like rather than go around her, you co-opted her instead.”

“Me? No,” said the priest. “But God? Yes.”

“So that’s how you got the ceremony together in time?”

“Pretty much. Once the two ladies started talking the rest was easy. Now they get on like a house on fire. It's really funny to see. You’d think they were long lost sisters or something.”

“Well how lucky for you Mijo.”

“Yes,” said the priest. “I really am blessed.”

The conversation paused for a moment, both friends thinking, happy. Patty Pérez finally spoke, “So is that it, Mijo?”

“Not quite. There’s one more thing Tia.”

“Shoot,” she said.

“At the mass this morning I found myself at times in the back of the church, watching, listening. You know, trying to get a feel for the service; how it is going.”

“Sure. And?”

“And, well I over heard something a few times. A comment about me, at least I think it's about me.”

“Uh oh,” Patty Pérez said. “Bad?”

“No,” he said. “Not that. Something else, something different.”

“Different?”

“Si. They called me ‘El Afortunado’.”

“That’s it?”



“Yes.”

“Oh Mijo. Don’t you know? You are the lucky one.”

“I am?” Father Juan said with surprise in his voice. “Really?”

“Si, Mijo. Si. You are the luckiest a man as I have ever met.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Not in the least,” she said. “Listen, you, this is you’re Aunt Pérez talking, not some pie-eyed wet-back out of the mountains. You are a lucky man. I’ve known this all along ever since the day we became friends.”

“Huh,” said the priest. “I don’t feel lucky. Do you really think so?”

“Think? No, I *know* it. I’ve been telling you this for years. You just never listened.”

“I haven’t?”

“Si. You wanna know something else?”

“What?”

“Being lucky is a lot harder than being cursed.”

“It is?”

“Sure. Being cursed is easy. All you have to do is believe what others tell you. But being lucky; that’s harder. To be lucky you have to believe in yourself and pretty much ignore what anyone else says.”

“That’s harder,” he asked?

“It’s the hardest thing a man can ever do Mijo. Count on it.”

## Chapter 21

(Monday, 12/13)

The next day went by in a rush for Father Juan. The three workers at the parish enjoyed the quiet of a normal working day after all the frenzy of the day before. They said very little to each other as if talking might break this spell. The glow of a job well done carried them through the evening giving them each

a smile.

Still feeling good, Father Juan walked home in the early dark of a winter evening. Christmas was coming soon and he was thinking about who he needed to shop for. The glowing Christmas lights from each house fell onto the small street, giving it a festive look. He sang carols to himself as he walked, hands in his pockets, breath frosty from the cold.

Later that night the phone rang as he was sitting in his reading chair going over some catalogs, looking for gift ideas. He set down the reading glasses he was holding in his hand and picked up the phone. "Hello," he said into the receiver.

"Hello Father. It's Lieutenant Dellarosa from Amarillo PD."

"Yes, Lieutenant," Father Juan said, after a moment, recognizing the voice. "How can I help you?"

"Well," said the lieutenant. "I read your file."

There was a pause. "Yes," said the priest?

"And I did some checking."

"Of course, Lieutenant, that is to be expected."

There was a longer pause. Father Juan waited, sensing the lieutenant's need to think. "Well," continued the lieutenant. "I honestly don't know what to say. I don't believe you. I still don't believe you. You're story is too... too..."

"Too fantastic," offered Father Juan, "too incredible?"

"Yes, that, too incredible. The thing is I don't believe you but I do believe Lieutenant Sonderson at San Bernardino PD and I do believe Captain Williams at Tuscon PD. They're cops. They make sense. At least they make sense to me. None of this makes sense but them... I can believe them."

Father Juan waited, listening to the man breathe on the other line. Was he at home, he wondered? Was he at some bar? Was there any trace of whiskey on his breath? Suddenly high pitched laughter came through the line – children. It sounded like it came from a distance, from another room. Then a woman's voice cut over the laughter. In rapid fire Spanish she told the boys to leave their father alone while he was working. Probably not whiskey then, good, he thought. Children make a man old but they also make him wise, cautious. He liked wisdom in a cop, caution.

"I also talked to a reporter," continued the lieutenant. Father Juan could hear him going through a stack of papers. He could visualize a neat desk and several

small notebooks with clean printing file folders laying in a pattern, each offset so that the top ones did not obscure the bottom ones.

“A Thomas Hansen at the Arizona Daily Star, down in Tucson,” said the lieutenant.

“Yes,” the priest said, his voice suddenly cold. “I remember a Mister Hansen.”

“I suppose you would,” said the lieutenant, “even though it's been several years.”

“Over 15 years, Lieutenant,” said Father Juan. “Some things one never forgets.”

“Too right, Father,” the lieutenant said with genuine sympathy in his voice, “too right.” Anyway this Thomas Hansen told me an incredible story. He said he met a priest from a small parish out of Tucson. A priest who's name just happened to be Father Juan. Then he told me this priest had been arrested by the Tucson PD for murder. In the process of his investigation, the Chief over there, some hot shot, friend-of-the-Governor, political appointee and a bit of an ass, Hansen said, thought he would speed things along by talking to the priest himself.”

Father Juan's throat went dry. He could picture the room, the cold blue-grey of the concrete walls, the slanting light of the evening sun poking through the blinds, the smell of sweat and fear. He was handcuffed to the table, sitting on a metal chair with a green leather seat. The leather was scuffed, old, worn. There was an ashtray on the table, and a pack of cigarettes. Father Juan ignored both. Across the far wall, facing him, was a dark window. He could see his grizzled reflection even in the low light. He knew he was being observed from someone on the other side and all he could think about was that he was missing the church's softball game. Who would coach the kids? No one else knew where he stored the bat bag or where the bases were kept. He had tried to call the church, call the Senior Father, even call Father Manuel from the visiting parish but they wouldn't let him.

The lieutenant murmured something and it brought Father Juan back to the present. “I'm sorry, Lieutenant. What did you say?”

“No problem, Father. I was saying the Chief walked into this room, into a room with an unarmed priest and 30 minutes later he died, right there, no one else in the room. Is that so Father?”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” said the priest almost whispering. “It is so.”

“Well that's a pretty open and shut case,” rambled the lieutenant. “I mean

anybody who killed a police chief like that, with political connections up the wazoo and all, was sure to be, as we like to say, sent down the river. Only this Hansen guy says that isn't what happened."

The lieutenant stopped talking and took a sip of something. Father Juan could hear the fizz of a soft drink over the phone.

"Do you believe in God, Father? Do you believe in miracles?"

"I'm sorry," the priest said?

"I asked Father because this guy, this Hansen guy. He didn't believe in God. Told me it would take a miracle to keep that priest out of prison. He was going down. Everyone said so, he said. Only at the trial, it didn't go that way."

"The prosecution decided to put the Chief's wife up on the stand," the lieutenant continued. "She was a real ball buster. That's what Hansen called her, an up-and-comer, a publicity queen looking at running for the House or Senate or something. The DA figured she would cement the case, he said. Figured she would tie it up all nice and tight. Only the defense fought against her taking the stand. Hansen said the priest, this Father Juan, wouldn't defend himself, refused to say anything about what happened in that room but fought hard to keep that woman out of the trial. Hearing this, well the DA smelled blood. This was the act of a desperate man, so he figured. So of course he put her up there."

"Mrs. Gordon Blakely," the priest interrupted. "May God rest her soul."

"I'm sorry, who was that Father?"

"Geneva Blakely," repeated the priest, "the wife of the police chief." She was the daughter of some rich man, a manufacturing king of something. She also had three children, one of them quite young."

"So you tried to keep her off the stand, Father?"

"Oh yes. Are you kidding?"

"Why, Father? Why keep her off the stand?"

"She was a mother," shouted the priest! " She had children. She may have been a criminal but her children were innocent. *They* didn't do anything wrong. They didn't deserve.... you talked to Hansen. He was in court that day. He saw what happened."

"Then it's true," said the lieutenant in surprise. "She did confess to murder, to money laundering, to all kinds of crimes."

"Oh yes," said the priest. She was a real ticket, that one. She got up on that stand with all kinds of fire in her eyes and then the next thing you knew, she

started confessing to all these crimes.”

“And you knew this,” asked the cop?

“Of course. What do you think her husband told me before he died? They had this whole little scheme going, those two, blackmail, murder, drugs, you name it. They were a real pair. I tried to keep her off the stand. I did everything I could to keep her from talking, even praying she would get laryngitis. Anything, but In the end, there was nothing I could do.”

“So she died? Right there in court?”

“Oh yes. It was horrible. I kept thinking about her children.” Tears flowed down the priest face, wetting his collar, his shirt. “I yelled at the bailiff to call an ambulance. He just looked at me like I was an idiot, called me a stupid spic. I tried telling the judge, I actually stood up and waived my arms to get his attention but he kept banging his gavel. He wouldn’t listen. I knew what was happening. I could tell she was going to die but no one would do anything.”

The lieutenant was quiet for a moment. “Hansen told me you tried giving her mouth-to-mouth. Is that true?”

“Yes,” said the priest, wiping his eyes.

“And the bailiff, he tried to stop you?”

“Some men are just...too closed minded to see, Lieutenant. Surely you’ve noticed this. Prejudice is a weakness we all must face. When the jury came off the bench, that’s when he stopped fighting me. One of the jurors was a doctor, thank God. He tried hard to save her but she was too far gone. There was nothing he could do. Afterwards, when the paramedics came and took her away, I told him so. He was so sad. It seemed to make him feel better.”

“So they just let you go?”

“The case was declared a mistrial. A few days later, the charges were dropped. Once they started doing an actual investigation they knew they couldn’t try me without bringing up Blakely’s past, his connections to the Governor. There was a lot of pressure on the church. They...”

“They moved you to another parish,” the lieutenant asked?

“You must understand, Lieutenant. I do not blame the church. There are some things, things even men of God do not comprehend. Maybe even things we are not meant to comprehend. A man must stand on his own two feet and stare into the chaos of the world. The church has enough problems. I try not to add any more.”

The phone was silent, the lieutenant thinking. "This... this will happen again?"

"Who knows the mind of God, Lieutenant? If I had to guess, I would say yes."

"When it does, will you call me?"

"Gladly," said the priest, "or at least as glad as the situation requires. I am never glad to see death."

"Certainly, Father, and if you learn anything... if someone confesses something important... will you tell me?"

"As prayer and the Holy Spirit dictates, Lieutenant, nothing more."

"Well I guess that is as good an answer as I am going to get," said the lieutenant.

Father Juan said nothing.

"One more thing, Father, if I may ask."

"Yes, son."

"Why didn't you say anything? At the trial I mean."

"You mean, why didn't I defend myself? Is that what you meant, Lieutenant?"

"Yes."

"An oath to God is a sacred thing, Lieutenant and it should never be taken lightly. It is...I think if I broke the Sacrament of Penance, even to a criminal, a sinner before man and God, I think it would... it would..." He paused for a moment. "People come to me because they trust me, Lieutenant. They say things to me, terrible things. Things they would never tell another man. They do this in hope of forgiveness, of salvation. They are looking for the final grace of God. If God calls them to me, then whom am I to judge?"

"You are a good priest Father. The church is lucky to have you."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I try."

"And Father..."

"Yes Lieutenant."

"Thomas Hansen asked me to tell you something, if I talked to you."

"Yes Lieutenant."

"He asked me to thank you, Father. Said ever since that trial, he never goes a week without going to church and to confession. He was quite specific about the confession part."

“I’m sure he was Lieutenant.”

There was a moment of silence. The cop cleared his throat, took a sip of his drink. Then very quietly, as if he was covering the receiver with his hand so no one at his house could over hear, he asked, “Can a man, Father... Can a man be scared into God?”

“A man can be scared into doing almost anything Lieutenant.”

“But using fear, using death for God?” He sounded surprised.

“Using whatever, I think God will happily use any tool to bring a man to salvation. The truth is, we... you and I, we do not know. No one knows the mind of God Lieutenant. Not in this life.” The priest paused for a second. After a moment, he continued. “But thank you Lieutenant, for telling me about Thomas. I’m glad someone was able to find grace after that poor woman’s death. That really means a lot to me.”

## Chapter 22

*(Thursday, 12/23)*

The Christmas holiday is a busy time for a church. Between the prayers, vigils, masses and celebrations the staff at a small parish can be awful busy. Because of the activities surrounding Advent, Father Juan had not had time to think about the events of the last few weeks. Nor had he been able to get out and jog in the morning, which was both his favorite exercise and a time he used to do deep thinking.

So on the morning of the 23rd Father Juan got up extra early with the plan to do his regular jog before going to the parish. He put on his sweats, tied his shoes and put on his odometer/watch. After stretching his legs, he quietly made his way down the stairs. There was still a morning mist in the air and the dew was rich on the grass and weeds. The sun would not be up for a while but there was enough light to see by, if one was careful. On a hunch, he turned left at the base of the stairs and went around the corner of his building. There he found the familiar shrine with candles and offerings. Even though he knew it was there, for some reason it made him angry to see it this morning. The cartons of

cigarettes, the half filled bottles of jack, the flowers, the notes, the pesos, the pennies, all of it made him terribly frustrated. He went back into the house and grabbed a trash can which he carried downstairs. He grabbed everything, bottles, candies, money, tossed it all in the can. The more stuff he picked up, the angrier he became, until he tossed in a bottle that smashed against another inside the can and the resultant sound of broken glass was like a shot in the pre-dawn silence.

The sound made him start and like a pin to a balloon, popped his anger. He sat there on his knees holding the can in one hand and a still burning votive in the other. Had he tossed that in, the alcohol would have ignited in a second. "Santa Maria," he said under his breath, as he slowly put the votive back. "What is coming over me?"

The small statue of the skeleton bride remained at the center of the shrine. He carefully emptied the offerings from the trash can that were not broken and tried to put them back where they came from. All the while he was thinking that this was crazy. What am I doing? Yet he did not stop until the shrine was neat and tidy, cleaner than it was when he had found it. Never before in all the years, and he did find a shrine like this next to every place he had ever lived, had he attempted to throw anything away or otherwise disturb the shrine. It was not like him to vent his anger like that and to do so against a shrine made him cringe. He was too much a boy from a poor Mexican family to not have some superstition about shrines such as these. His years of seminary and subsequent years as a priest had taught him to regard such places of worship as crude and uncultured. But until today, he had never been disrespectful.

He felt the shame of his act keenly and tried to think of what he should do. Finally an idea dawned on him. Working quickly, he picked up everything from the shrine; candies and cigarettes, anything that might draw vermin and put them back in the can. Then he tidied up everything else by grouping them together, removing the spider webs, weeds and picking out the dead leaves. When he was done, the shrine at least looked tidy. "If I'm going to have to live with you," he said quietly, "then you're going to have to be a little bit cleaner. I hope you don't mind but I cannot let my landlady see you in a mess."

Feeling like he had struck a fair balance, he took the trash can upstairs. When he came back down, whistling quietly, he realized he felt lighter than he had in months – relaxed. He stretched again and then started out on his jog, looking forward to pushing himself ever harder. Under his breath he repeated a line he used often while in meditation, "Begin anew, each day. Begin anew each day." As the sun rose, he let his feet and his mind carry him though the landscape, leaving his fear and pain further and further behind.



The sun was just cresting the horizon when Father Juan started back. His run had taken him out past fields he had never seen before. Small farms lay across the landscape in discrete bunches – trees and bushes marking the location of a house, well head and ditches marking the boundaries. Many of the farms had small signs telling all who passed the name of the family who proudly worked the land. The German names were prevalent, like Schmidt and Müller, but other names could be found as well. Even the odd Spanish one, like Sanchez, was found on one sign.

Since trees were planted only where there was a house, the otherwise treeless landscape made it easy to see when he was coming up on a new farm. These clumps of trees also made it easy to navigate the countryside. Some trees were so large that they could be seen for miles. As long as Father Juan could see them, he knew he could find his way back. One such tree was a massive oak, its branches thick and tall. Father Juan had been using it as a landmark for several weeks but had never been close to it. This morning he turned down a smaller side street and soon discovered he was jogging straight for the massive tree. When he got close, he stopped for a break. He knew he was within a mile or so of town. He could walk the rest if he had to.

Up close the oak seemed even bigger. The trunk was dusty and pitted, the lower branches frayed but even then it was a massive tree. It grew on the side of the road, casting a huge shadow. When he approached, Father Juan noticed there was no house. To one side of the tree he could just make out the broken down remains of a foundation. Broken slate and stones roughed out the rooms, a pile of brick indicated the fireplace. Weeds poked up through the ruins but none too large. Out back of the house, what looked like an old outhouse, proved to be a small shed. A large pipe coming out of one side indicated it was a well house, a small shed to cover the wellhead. The door to the well house was opened a crack and the sound of the working pump came through. Condensation on the pipe showed that the well was pumping cool water from down deep. Father Juan approached the well house, intent on what the dark crack revealed. He had just reached a tentative hand to the door when he heard a sound of footsteps behind him. He turned rapidly and stared into the eyes of the old woman from the wedding and the basketball game.

The woman was wearing a large shapeless dress that draped over her frame, hiding more than it revealed. Her thick grey hair was pulled back, a few feathers woven into it here and there. She wore thick silver rings on each finger and had a belt or sash around her waist from which hung cups, trinkets and other items, all suspended by silver chains. In person, she seemed even smaller, except for her eyes which were dark and electric. Her teeth were stained and stubby like

stones that had been worn down from hard use; vestiges of cornmeal ground the old way by mortar and pestle with the fine stone powder mixed into the corn. This ground the teeth lower and lower like so much polishing compound. Her round weathered face, high cheekbones, and dark eyes showed she had old Indian blood in her. Age and arthritis had twisted her hands until they looked almost like claws.

After what seemed like hours but was probably seconds, Father Juan realized he was staring at her, rooted to the spot. Her eyes upon him felt cold, predatory, as if she was inspecting a side of meat for her next supper. Once again his habit of kindness paid off. "Forgive me Abuela," he said in the rougher Spanish of the Mexican North East. His family had come from a very small town in the Santa Madre Orientals and this was the Spanish they spoke only at home. For some reason it felt right for her. "I did not wish to be rude. Your sudden appearance startled me."

The woman smiled at his address and spoke in the very same rustic Spanish, "You are not the first boy I have caught spying on my home but at least you are polite. Some of the kids these days do not know to respect their elders."

"This is your home?" asked the priest in surprise. "Surely a grandmother of your stature deserves a grander house than this," he said indicating the pump house. "Does not your son have a place for you in his home?"

The old woman's eyes flashed at this. "You would think he would be more concerned for his own mother but my son, he is heartless." She looked at the small pump house and then smiled. "But it is not as bad as it seems. I am a small woman, my needs are few and I would rather live out here than in that house." The last part was finished with barely disguised venom.

Father Juan waited politely for her to say more but she seemed content to stare at him in silence. Father Juan waited patiently, knowing that older people sometimes took a while to get to their point. While he was waiting, he noticed that there were a lot of birds around this small area. This tree must host hundreds of nests, he thought, based on the sounds he was hearing. Then the morning sun sparkled on the dew which had gathered on the occasional weed and bush. He noticed insects flying around the plants, the ground and the flowers. The more he looked, the more he felt like he was standing in a garden, one that had just been planted a few months ago and was now bursting with life. Only it was a garden made up of weeds, of plants native to the area, with not a single one trimmed or cut into some unnatural shape like squares or animals. Yet the weeds, the insects, the birds, somehow formed a harmonious pattern, a natural garden, a place pleasing to the eye and heart – a lush green

garden on the third day of winter.

“Did you plant this?” he asked, indicating the garden around them. “It is very... You must be very knowledgeable about plants.”

“Thank you,” she smiled, her eyes shining with mischief.

“I have not seen you at the parish before, Abuela. Do you go there often?”

“Perhaps,” she responded, “you are not looking in the right place.

“I ask,” said the priest, “because I am a priest there...”

“I know who you are, mijo,” she said.

“Yes... but... looking at your garden, it made me think you are the wise one, the gossip for the church.”

“I am sometimes called that, yes.”

“Excellent, because you see there have been people leaving offerings at the statue of the virgin...”

“Yes, son?” the old woman interrupted, her tone was suddenly icy. “That sounds just like my sister. She’s always getting the best stuff.”

“Well, uh,” said the priest suddenly worried he had said the wrong thing. “You see, the thing is,” he continued, “the parish is an old one and most of the families are from Germany, Abuela. They are not used to such offerings left for their Madonna. They do not see this as a sign of respect. They think of it as... well not good. Do you know what I mean?”

The old woman smiled, showing her stubby teeth. “Oh, yes son. I understand. They are not comfortable with such trinkets left at the feet of their Madonna. I know exactly how to fix that.”

“Good,” said the priest feeling relieved. “I knew you would.”

“No, you did not. But now you are glad you asked,” the old woman said flatly.

Surprised at her response Father Juan started to tell her she was wrong but stopped himself when he realized what she had said was the truth – the absolute truth. “You are very wise, Abuela,” he said instead.

“Yes,” was her response, delivered in the same flat tone as before. It was neither a brag or a boast but a simple admission of truth.

This was a very unusual woman he thought. After a moment he added, “This is the most interesting conversation I have had in a long time, Abuela. I wish I had met you sooner.”

“But you have, mijo.”

“I have, Abuela?”

“Yes, we have met before. You do not remember.”

“I’m, sorry, Abuela but I do not remember.”

“Yes, mijo, you don’t remember. But you will. Soon you will remember, you will remember everything.”

“Hmm,” said the priest, “why is it I don’t like the sound of that?”

“You are coming to a beginning, and an end – a birth and a death. Such events are never without their power or their pain. This is the way of things. You, of all people, should know this by now.”

The priest nodded, not knowing what to say.

“There is a seed in you, mijo,” the old woman continued. “The blessing of the dark one has grown in you and flowered. But soon it will be harvested. When it is cut, so will be your vow. They are one and the same. When this happens, the old will be made new again. One marriage will end, so another may begin. This also is the way of things.”

“It is?”

“Yes, mijo. You have been a very patient son. You’re mother will be proud.”

“My mother?” the priest said feeling very confused. “You knew my mother?”

“Yes, mijo. I know her still.”

Father Juan’s head was spinning. The sunlight around the garden suddenly seemed brighter, like he had stepped from winter into summer, suddenly standing in another day. He felt overwhelmed, tired, dizzy.

The old woman put her hand to his arm to steady him.

“Who are you?” he asked in confusion. “Why...”

“You are a good son, mijo – very patient. You deserve so much but I can only tell you a little. The rest you must learn on your own.”

“But, why?”

“Listen you me, mijo. You have only a little bit of time left. Soon you will be beyond me again. You must pray to God every day.”

“But I do pray. I pray to God and the Madonna, everyday.” Father Juan felt confused, desperate. The sun seemed to get brighter. He had to raise a hand to protect his eyes. Even then it hurt to keep them open.

“Yes, mijo, but you must pray even more. Tell me, do you pray to the skinny one? Santa Muerte?”

The priest’s eyes flew open. No Abuela, I never have.”

“Then perhaps,” she said sternly, “it is time that you should.” Then in a kinder tone she whispered, “I am pretty sure she will hear you, mijo. That one knows of suffering and the poor. She will hear you.”

Tiredness filled the priest bones. He felt like a baby lying in the warmth and safety of his mother’s lap. He looked up and saw the old woman looking down upon him tenderly. How did I get here, he thought? She raised one hand and caressed his cheek. The hand was no longer a bent arthritic claw he remembered but soft and gentle. Perfect. Something about it felt familiar, like a memory from long ago.

He smiled as his eyes began to close. “Will I see you again?” he asked, the sunlight still bright on his face.

“Yes, mijo,” she said as if in a dream. “When you remember everything then you will see me. But not until then.”

She caressed his cheek one more time and then he felt nothing, nothing but contentment.

## Chapter 23

*(Thursday afternoon, 12/23)*

The noontime sun was falling on Father Juan's face when he awoke. Laying on his back, he could see up into a huge canopy of leaves. It was the large oak he noticed on his daily run. By chance, a small section of leaves were missing over his head which allowed the sunlight to directly fall on his face. He got up slowly taking in his surroundings. He was just off a small dirt road at the base of a large oak. The oak's shade provided cover for a scattering of weeds which were racing to reproduce before the spring weather turned to brutal summer. Flowers of different shapes and colors grew within this circle. A small building, looking to be a well house, was off to one side. The pump was not running but the pipe on its side showed signs of condensation which had dripped onto the ground and fueled a healthy competition. Something about the place reminded Father Juan

of a garden but that seemed silly. The closest building was ¼ mile away, the backside of the warehouse for the Alvarez Trucking Company. Who would put a garden out in the middle of nowhere?

Contained within the shady area was the foundation of an old house, long since lost to the elements. There was an age to the place that made Father Juan feel wistful, contemplative, maybe even a little sad.

He knew he was only a short distance from home, so he stretched out a few kinks, brushed the dirt off his clothes and jogged lightly into town.

On his way in he was passed by Emily in her truck. She rolled down the window and slowed next to him, “A bit late in the day for you to be out jogging.” Her tone was light, but there was an element of concern underneath.

“Is it?” asked Father Juan. “I didn't know.”

“Are you kidding?” she asked. “It's almost 12:30. I was starting to worry about you.”

“Nope.” he responded. “Not kidding. I was... I was out jogging and for some reason I must have fallen asleep. I really don't know why. I woke up with the strangest dream at the base of that huge oak over there,” he said, pointing to the tree.

“You mean at the old Seller's place,” she asked?

“I guess. Is that what that is?”

“It's where Father Seller lived when he first started this community, some hundred years ago, right underneath that tree.”

“Well that explains the crumbling foundation I saw,” said the priest. “It looks like it has seen better days, except for the well house.”

“Yep. The house came down about the year I was born. It was a big deal around here. The Sellers moved on after their well ran dry, probably 10 years before then. They moved on to somewhere closer to the parish, the Well's house I think. I don't remember.”

“Hmm,” said Father Juan with a smile. “Since it's so late in the day, I guess I better go to work.”

“That would probably be a good idea,” she replied, smiling as well. “Do you need a lift? I'm just coming back from dropping off some stuff at home. I know Father Jacob will be glad to see you.”

The priest looked down the road and then up at the sun. “Yes, I suppose that would be a very good idea,” he said. “I don't know if it's the nap or what but I'm

feeling a bit loopy right now.”

“Well the door's unlocked,” she said. “Hop on in.”

As he got into the truck she asked, “You been getting enough sleep?”

“Uh, sure,” he replied. “Why do you ask?”

“Well a nap in the middle of the day is rather unusual around here.”

“Oh.” he said. “It's rather unusual for me too.”

She stopped the truck at a 4-way stop sign and then continued. “It's not a siesta is it?”

“Siesta? How would I know? I thought a siesta came after you worked hard all morning, not before. Isn't that how it works?”

“I don't know. I thought it was a Mexican thing or something.”

“It's a Spanish thing but not necessarily a Mexican one. The two are similar but not the same.”

“Oh,” she replied.

They pulled up at the church and both got out. Father Juan held the door open for Emily, then headed into the office while she dropped off some food in the kitchen.

“Hey there boss,” Father Juan said as he walked in the senior Father's office.

“Well look what the cat drug in. Where you been?”

“Well, to be honest,” said Father Juan, “napping. I just woke up under the big oak at Seller's place. I don't honestly know why. Mrs. Hoffman took pity on me when she saw me walking and gave me a lift into town.”

“Napping, you say,” asked the senior priest? “That doesn't sound like you. Are you feeling okay? Getting enough sleep?”

“Yes and yes,” said Father Juan. “At least I think so.”

“Good, because John Haskin's well just shut down and I want to take a look at it. Think you can hold down the fort while I'm away?”

“Do I have time to clean up? From the way I smell, it appears I ran for an hour and then decided to nap in the middle of nowhere.”

“Boy, I'll say,” said Emily as she walked in behind him, waving her hand in front of her nose. “Pewee!”

“Hurry back then,” said Father Jacob. “I don't want to be working in the dark. Oh, and Father? One more thing – no more sleeping on the job, eh?”

“No,” said Father Juan, turning red. “No more naps.”

Father Juan rushed home and jumped in the shower. The mystery of his morning nap still bothering him. He came out of the shower, still dripping and happened to glance at himself in the fogged up mirror. What he saw made him jump. Instead of his usually reflected self, he saw a man, heavier in weight but about the same age. The man's head was shaved bald and he had tattoos over his chest, arms and neck. Father Juan reached his hand up towards the mirror and watched the tattooed man do the same, reflecting his motions perfectly. He leaned in towards the mirror for a better look. In between patches of condensation, he could see that the eyes looking back were blood shot and had more bags underneath but otherwise they reflected the same shock and disbelief as Father Juan felt. Moving about for a clear spot on the mirror, he discovered a single tear-drop shaped tattoo in the corner of his right eye and both his ears were pierced. There was also several scars on his chest and shoulders, knife and bullet wounds. When he got close, his breath condensed on the glass, obscuring the man further.

In frustration, Father Juan took his towel and wiped the steam off the mirror. He watched the other man do the same through the steam. When he removed his towel, he was looking at his own self again, thin, thick haired, tattoo free. Turning his back to the mirror, Father Juan dried himself quickly and left the bathroom with his hair still in disarray.

As he walked quickly to work, hair still wet, he suddenly remembered the tattoos. They were from a local gang in his neighborhood, back when he was a teen. Even though he had never been in a gang, he could remember the pain, the burning of the tattoo needle, for each and every one. His skin tingled with the memory, sending goose bumps up his back.

## Chapter 24

A cup of coffee and a pile of paperwork at the church soothed Father Juan



and helped him forget. When Emily asked him if he needed anything upon leaving, he surfaced from his cubicle long enough to chit-chat but couldn't wait to dive back in. Feeling guilty about the morning, he worked until almost 8:00 before heading home. A piece of left over chicken in his refrigerator hit his stomach hard. He grabbed a few crackers but the idea of being cooped up in that small apartment, with the other man behind the bathroom mirror, was more than he could stand.

While walking out, he heard the sound of Mali taking shots at the basket. He walked around the corner of the barn, still holding a pile of crackers in his hand. Mali had just finished a nice jump shot from the top of the key. The ball sailed in a clean arc ending perfectly centered in the net. Shwoosh.

Mali noticed Father Juan as he jogged forward to claim the ball. "Hey," he said.

"Hey," called Father Juan.

"Up for a game?" the boy asked.

"Not really," said Father Juan. "Weird day."

"No kidding," said the boy. "Weird day."

"Really," asked the priest? "Your day was weird too? That makes me feel better already. What happened?"

The boy looked at him, looked at the basket and then back at the priest. Letting out a sigh he turned away from the basket and walked over to the priest. He set the ball down and then sat on it like a chair. Father Juan crossed his legs and let himself drop to the ground, leaning against the old barn.

"Well, first of all," the boy started, "I was late to school and my first period teacher was all on my case. When I told her I was tired, she sent me to the office."

"That sucks," said the priest.

"Tell me about it," the boy continued. "When I got to second period, I walked in just in time for a pop quiz in Algebra."

The priest held up two fingers, "That's two sucks. How'd you do, by the way?"

"What?"

"The quiz, the pop quiz. How'd you do?"

The boy shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Okay I guess."

“Okay, just okay?”

“Well I got eight out of ten but I missed the easy ones.”

“Wait a minute,” said the priest. “You walked into a pop quiz cold and just after coming from the office, you only missed the easy ones? Dude, you rock!”

The priest held up his hand for a high five. Mali sheepishly slapped his hand and then put his arm down. He didn't show much but a tentative smile crept on his face.

“So what else?” the priest asked.

“Um, well... in fifth period I was late, because I was slowly eating my lunch. But I only got a warning for that.”

“Well that's not bad, almost a negative suck.”

“Well, yah and then in sixth period the basketball coach...”

“Coach Doyle?” The priest asked.

“Yes, him. Anyway he asked to see me after class. I was all wondering what I had done, or something, but when I got there he asked me if I would try out for the team.”

“He did,” asked the priest in surprise?

“Yah, weird huh?”

“Weird,” replied the priest? “No I think that's a compliment. Do you think he asks just anyone to join the team?”

“But we were just playing around and stuff, goofing off like you and I do, doing funny shots and stuff.”

“Look Mali. I don't know how to say this but you're good. Very good! You've got great hands, you're very fast and you have a lot of bulk.”

The boy looked down, “I know I'm heavy, Father, but...”

“Not heavy, Mali, bulk. It's not a 'fat' thing, it's a mass thing. Put it this way. If you and a 150 pound boy are both going for a loose ball just who do you think is going to end up with it?”

Mali smiled. “Me,” he said pointing a thumb to his chest.

“Exactly. Do you know why?”

“Well,” said the boy, “if I just drop my shoulder a bit,” Mali lowered a shoulder and tucked it in to illustrate, “and lean in, it usually stops the other guy.”

“That's the 'how', not the 'why', but it's a very good start. Let me ask you

this, "If a VW bug and a school bus collide who's going to get the best of it?"

"Huh, why that Bug wouldn't stand a chance. It's too little."

"Exactly! It's got less mass. It's like this." The priest bent over and wrote upside down in the dirt:

$$F=MA$$

"Now I know you're good in math. We've gone over you're algebra enough times to see that, so what's this say? The F stands for force, the M for mass; your weight, and the A stands for acceleration; roughly the speed you are traveling at."

"Huh? I don't know," said the boy.

"Put it this way," said the priest. "If you're running at 10 miles per hour and you weigh 200 lbs..."

"228," said the boy.

"228, then your force, mass times acceleration, is equal to 2280, right?"

Mali glanced at the formula. "Sure."

"Okay," continued the priest. "So if there is another boy coming for the same ball and he is also traveling at the same 10 miles per hour but only weighs 150 pounds, what's his force?"

Mali counted in his head. "1500?"

"Exactly, 2280 verses 1500. Who do you think is going to end up with that ball?"

Mali's eyes opened wide. "Huh? I never thought..."

"You never thought being fat would have an advantage," said the priest?

"No. Well, yes. I always thought it was a bad thing."

"Well it is, if it eventually kills you or if you can't move in a hurry. But if you have mass and can move or accelerate, why then you're pack'n a lot of punch."

Mali stared off into space, thinking.

"Ever watch Shaq play," asked the priest?

"Him," the boy responded? "He's old."

"Sure," said the priest. "But did you ever watch him play? He's so big, he dominates the game. Wherever he goes, the other guys play around him. And whenever he stops, well... you stop too. Did I ever tell you I played against him?"

“You played against Shaq,” said the boy, disbelief in his voice?

“Sure. He's about my age and he went to a nearby school. I was at the local park one day and by luck got asked to join a pick up game with some of his friends. Let me tell you, when you go up against a guy like that, you feel it. He's a bruiser. I think the only reason they asked me to play is because no body else wanted to play against him. So he and I went toe to toe. I even scored a few shots against him.”

“You scored on Shaq,” said the boy? “I don't believe it.”

“Only a few shots, mind you. He's that good.” The priest smiled at the memory. “And I had to really hustle for those. But even a big guy can be played, if you're quick enough, and can shoot.”

“You were that good?”

“Good enough to win a college scholarship. Full ride too. All four years.”

“Then what happened?”

“Huh? Well I became a priest instead. I went to seminary, kind of a college for priests. I played on their team but it wasn't really a league.”

Mali let this sink in while Father Juan relaxed, thinking about the games in played in college. The night had turned cool. Moths circled the two lights over the court while the light from Mali's kitchen spilled onto the ground at the far end. Crickets could be heard chirping from the dark grass. Way off in the distance a radio played softly and the occasional voice or car could be heard.

After several minutes the boy asked, “So what made you become a priest?”

Father Juan had a canned answer for this, as it was a question he got asked often. The usual “needing to make a difference,” or “felt the power of God” answer was what most people wanted to hear. The truth was always a bit stranger and most people didn't really want to know the truth, they only wanted to reinforce their preconceived notions of reality. Only this time Father Juan felt the truth was the best answer.

“Because,” the priest said, “Jorge Sinceros died.”

“What,” said the boy?

“Because Jorge Sinceros died,” repeated the priest.

“Who is Hor-hay Sinceros?”

“Hor-hey, or George in English, is... was a guy living near our block. He was a gang banger – sort of a mid level, uh, leader, like a manager for a Walmart or

something. Only what he managed was crime. In this case, drugs.

“He was a drug dealer?”

“Well not quite. More like a drug distributor. You see drug dealers worked for him, gang bangers. He would get them drugs and they, the gang bangers, would sell them. He would collect the profit and then use it to support the gang. Some went to the dealers below him, but most went for expenses; guns, drugs and such, and the rest to the gang leaders above him. He also kept a decent cut for himself. Really, not all unlike any other business, only the 'stores' were the guys on the streets and they tended to get very serious if someone tried to open up a competing store in their neighborhood.”

“And this...” said the boy. “is how you became a priest?”

“Well, that,” said the priest. “That gets a bit complicated, stay with me. See, old Jorge had a problem. A rival gang noticed his profits and wanted his turf. They decided to move in on his area, sort of a hostile corporate takeover. Only in this case hostile takeover meant using guns and bullets.”

“Hostile takeover? How's that work?”

“Well, if you want a rival gang's turf, you can do two things. You can cut your drug prices, which cuts into your profits, but drives sales up, or you can go over to the sellers on the other turf and shoot them. In essence, try to scare them off. Incidentally, this is what usually happens when you hear about drive-by shootings and the like. They are usually the sign of a competition for a particular neighborhood. Anyway, in this case, the rival gang did both. They cut their prices, forcing Jorge to do the same if he wanted to compete and then they started shooting his dealers.

Now Jorge didn't think this was such a good idea, so he tried to stop it. Only he was pretty sharp since he had been in the gang business for a while, so instead of trying to shoot the rival gang's dealers, the low-level gang bangers, he went after their middle management; the guys, like him, who controlled the gang bangers. And he succeeded. Better than he ever imagined, really. In one quick raid he almost finished off the rival gang.”

“But he didn't.”

“Nope, not quite. You see, against any other gang that would have been a good strategy, cut off the head and the body dies. Only in this case it made the situation worse. Far from scaring the rival gang, it made them go crazy loco. They vowed they would do anything to get even and, well, they did...”

“Uh... How do you know this? Was the rival gang on your block or

something?”

“Oh, didn't I say,” responded the priest. “The rival gang was my family. Jorge Sinceros killed my father.”

“What? He killed your... Wait a minute? Your family was in a gang?”

“More like, my family was the gang. My father ran things, but my mother, brothers, sisters, cousins, all of them, were the gang.

“So how did you get to...”

“I'm getting to that. When my father was killed, my mother took over the family business. Everyone else, including my big brother, were angry and maybe a little bit terrified, but mom... she got crazy. She wasn't just angry, she didn't want to just get even, she wanted more. She wanted to hurt Jorge bad; in a way that would make it clear no one messed with our family. She wanted to send a message. ”

“See my family comes from Nuevo Leon in Northern Mexico, from a little town way up in the Sierra Madres. It's a bad place, a place full of outlaws and murderers. Gang banging sort of runs in the family, know what I mean? But the people up there are also very religious, part Aztec, part Catholic, part crazy superstition. It's a bit hard for me to describe and my family comes from there.”

“So my whole family,” the priest continued, “was a bit crazy about religion. I didn't pay them much mind, I was 15 and out shooting hoop whenever I could. Things were bad and the family business was not really my thing, so I tried to stay out of everyone's way, focusing on the basketball, kind of like what you're doing now.”

Mali smiled as if caught with a secret. “Does it show that much,” he asked?

“Only if you know where to look,” said the priest.

“But, there's something about bouncing the ball,” said the boy, “that just... I don't know.... I don't know how to say it. It just makes my mind go blank... or something.”

The priest nodded in sympathy. “I used to think of it as a type of autohypnosis, a way to focus on one task and forget about other things. But now, I'm not so sure. Now, I think it's more like a type of meditation, a moving meditation. No doubt there is some fancy word for it. Who knows? I only know when I feel like shit, it helps.”

Mali was slightly shocked at the priest's language.

“What,” said Father Juan? “Never heard a priest say ‘shit’ before?”

The boy blushed and Father Juan laughed. "Don't worry about it," he said. "who cares if a little hoop is good for you or not. That's not why you do it and it's not why I do it. Heck, if I thought it was medicine, I would have stopped long ago. It's fun, it feels good and usually no one gets hurt."

"Okay," said the boy. "So what happened?"

"Well," said Father Juan, "my mom somehow decided that the only way to get even with Jorge was to make a vow to God, so she did. Every night when we would all sit down for dinner, she would pray. And every night she ended the prayer with the same thing, 'and if Jorge Sinceros dies, I promise I will give my son to the church.'"

"So she made you become a priest?"

"It wasn't quite like that. The idea of being a priest already had some appeal. Like I said, I wasn't exactly cut out for the family business. I wanted to be something more than a banger and the priesthood looked like a good ticket out of the hood. I was a poor kid in a poor school and my academic record wasn't worth talking about. They don't exactly hand out scholarships to B and C students. I was good at hoop, but not great, so I knew my chances of going pro were not any better. What else did I have? As it turned out, a lot, but I didn't know that then."

Father Juan stopped for a second and then continued. "Around here I'll bet a lot of boys go into the military after graduation."

Mali nodded. "Both my brothers and my older sister joined the Marines."

"Well," said the priest, "I kind of made the same decision. There's more to it than that. Once I started seminary, I discovered I actually liked being a priest and I was pretty good at it too, which isn't bad for a gang banger from the barrio. Kind of like signing up for a short hitch and then deciding to stay and make officer."

Mali got up and dribbled out to the key, thinking. He turned and nailed a free throw before he walked over to the barn. He sat down next to the priest again and leaned against the wall. The shadow of the backboard crossed his face, obscuring all but his mouth. "So you became a priest and then this Hor-hey guy died?"

"Not quite," said the priest. "More like he died and then I almost became a priest."

"Almost?"

"Well, you see mom sort of went off the deep end and took everyone else

with her. She started inviting all these people over, shamans, wackos, scraggily looking priests from some weird religion, even Buddhists. She would pray or do anything, make any promise, all in order to get even with Jorge. I even remember one old lady from the mountains, a curandera, a kind of shaman. She had these ugly claw-like hands and a voice like finger nails on a chalkboard. Boy was she crazy. And she stank like a pig sty. She had my mom really twisted around her finger for almost a year. Man was she weird.

“So did he finally die?”

“No, not that easily. See for years, nothing happened. Jorge did not die, the family business went on and I pretty much ignored all of that stuff. I played hoop, went to school and tried to hang out with my friends as much as possible. Being around home was a drag and got to be more and more dangerous as mom kept trying to kill him off. Two of my brothers got arrested, one got killed and my older sister’s husband got killed.”

“How many brothers and sisters do you have?”

“Ten, at least, not counting in-laws.”

“Whew!”

“Yep. It was pretty easy to get lost in that crowd which I did as much as I could. See, you have to understand my mom came up with a new scheme to get rid of Jorge practically every week. It got to be a joke in the family, a ‘what is it *this* time’ kind of funny. Like I said, she got a little crazy and to be honest, I was too busy dealing with own problems to pay much attention to hers.”

“Then one day, something like two years later, Jorge died. and I don’t mean a little bit. He was taken out *hard!* He died in a way that left no doubt something weird was up. We’re talking blood and guts everywhere. It really freaked out the neighborhood, all except mom. She practically crowed about it like she had done it herself.”

“So I went to her after this had happened and said I needed to be a priest now. You gotta remember that all this time she had been calling me her little Father, asking me to pray at family gatherings, telling everyone who would listen that I was going to be the priest in the family. We had a little altar in the living room for burning candles for prayer and such. She even went as far as to only buy me brown hooded sweatshirts, so I would look like some monk or something. So I was expecting her to send me to seminary when I graduated which happened one year after Jorge died. Only she didn’t. She told me I didn’t have to be a priest. After years and years of the same prayer, Mom somehow got it in her head that she herself had killed Jorge. That her promise to God was



over, null and void. She said, ‘forget all about it.’”

“So I did. But here’s the weird thing – nobody else did. The rest of the family kept treating me like I was a priest, only more so. They actually started coming to me for confession. It was a little weird, let me tell you. Brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, they would come to me and tell me all the bad things they had done. It was terrible. I didn’t like the family business to begin with but when grown men would come up to me and tell me about murders and such, treat me like I was their priest, it was freaky. I didn’t *want* to know. I didn’t want to be there, around the drug dealing and such, anyway. I didn’t like what they did to people. Only now they confessed to me everything. I knew everything. It was like I was some weird spy or something – like I was spying on my family. I hated it. I really hated it.”

Father Juan got up quickly, the memory of past anger still strong in him. “Give me the ball,” he said. Then remembered to add, “Please.”

Mali rolled the ball to him. Father Juan scooped it up and dribbled out into the court. When he got past the key, he turned and dribbled in, charging the basket hard. He jumped with the ball in one hand and slammed it hard into the backboard. The ball bounced high off the rim and landed out at mid court. Father Juan was already running for it. When he retrieved the ball, he spun around to face the basket, his face a mask of anger. He dribbled in fast, maybe too fast, jumped high and slammed the ball into the backboard again. The sound of the metal backboard ringing from the impact was deafening, like some obscene bell tolling on the first church of hell.

Again and again, father Juan practiced lay-ups. Running fast, jumping high, hitting hard. The basket rang after each impact. Bang, bang, bang! Finally, exhausted and covered in sweat, he stopped next to Mali, bent over, hands on his knees and panting. “You know,” he said between pants, as if nothing had happened, “that still really pisses me off.”

“I kind of got that,” said the boy who had not moved the entire time.

The priest smiled, “Was it that obvious,” he asked in mock innocence?

Mali laughed. “Just a little bit, if you know where to look.”

They shared a laugh as Father Juan sat down. He let out a large sigh as he landed. “You know, you like to think of yourself as over something – like it happened so far in the past that you can handle it now.” The boy nodded. “Only sometimes that isn’t true, is it?”

Mali smiled sadly, “Nope. Sometimes it isn’t true.”

Father Juan gently rolled the ball over to Mali. It came to a stop just in front of his feet.

“Thanks for letting me abuse your ball,” the priest said. “I guess I needed to play tonight anyway.”

The boy responded, “At least now I know why the backboard is leaning to one side.”

Father Juan laughed. “Yep,” he said. “Next time I’m that angry, I’ll be sure to practice my left-side lay-ups. That way it’ll even out the backboard.”

They both chuckled. Mali got up and slipped the ball under his arm. “Mom’s gonna worry, if I don’t get started on my homework, soon.”

“All right, thanks for talking. Goodnight, Mali.”

“Goodnight, Father.”

As Mali walked across the court to his kitchen door, Father Juan noticed he walked with his back bent, as if he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. He’s too young for that, he thought, as he headed for his apartment. We’re all too young for that.

## Chapter 25

At around midnight Father Juan lay awake in his bed. Sleep had fled him but not the old fear, leaving him tired and with a coppery taste in his mouth. Hating to do it but knowing he needed to, he picked up the phone and dialed from memory. The phone picked up on the second ring.

“Mijo?” spoke the voice on the other end.

“I’m sorry Tia to call so late,” Father Juan spoke softly, “it’s just, I think, I think I’m going crazy.”

“Oh Mijo. What is the matter?”

A tear ran down Father Juan’s cheek, distracting him. Where did that come from, he thought? Then before he knew it, he was sobbing. “Oh Tia, it’s really bad – really bad this time. I don’t know what to do.”

The voice on the other end was calm, patient. “Hush now Mijo. You tell your

Tia what's wrong. We'll find some way to fix it.”

He tried to speak but for a long time, all he could do was cry.

## Chapter 26

*(Saturday, Mary, Mother of God Feast Day, 1/1)*

New Year's was always a celebration that Father Juan despised. He could understand the drinking and the partying but the thing which made him the most angry was the shooting of firearms into the air at midnight. How could one own a gun, he wondered, and still not know that what goes up must also come down? He thought that this small Texas town would not be so foolish in this misuse of guns, so he was surprised to be woken by the sound of distant gunfire. A few seconds later he heard a loud crack overhead on the tin roof of the old barn. It sounded like someone had hit the metal roof with a hammer. What had gone up had certainly come down. The crack was followed by another as the bullet bounced around and then slid off the roof. Father Juan muttered something uncharitable under his breath and then went back to sleep.

The next morning Father Juan got up and put on his clothes for jogging. Before taking off, he stood on the stoop outside his door and looked out over the town. Overnight the frost had mixed with the cold, putting a thin layer of white on every rooftop and car. After all the noise from last night, the frost looked peaceful, natural. As he turned to go back in, he stepped on something hard. Looking down he found a misshapen chunk of a bullet; the one that had hit his roof last night. He picked it up and looked at it. So small, he thought, and yet so dangerous. How could something this small end a man's life?

He pulled back his arm to toss the bullet out into the yard like so much trash, when a sudden thought stayed his hand. Instead, he walked down the stairs and around to the back of the barn. There he found the shrine to Santa Muerte, almost exactly like he had seen it last. Some more votives had been added but the shrine was largely unchanged. Father Juan placed the bullet next to one of the candles and thanked the saint for not killing anyone with this bullet. It was a small miracle, he thought, but a good one, just the same.

Feeling somewhat foolish, he walked back to the stairs and began stretching

his legs. Before long he was lost in the rhythm of his run, all thoughts of bullets and death forgotten.

*(Following Monday, 1/3)*

The following Monday, Father Juan woke up tired. Red rimmed eyes stared back at him in his bathroom mirror. Considering what he saw there just before Christmas, he took this as an improvement.

He took his time walking down his short hall way, letting the early morning light fall on the picture frames as he passed. These were his family, his heroes. Just looking at them reminded him of his connection to them and therefore to God. It was difficult to remain depressed for long when so many people loved him and had showed him kindness in his very dark hours. Each photo contained its own story of kindness, of mercy, of grace. The stories washed over him like a mountain spring, calming the pit in his stomach and steadying his heart.

Father Juan spent more time in prayer this morning than his habit but after the past few weeks he felt like he had a lot to pray about. The sun was just rising as he walked out onto the little landing at the top of his stairs. Thin clouds streaked the sky, marking the direction and steadiness of the wind. The sky was otherwise clear and blue, glowing with health, like a benediction for all things living. With a sigh, he walked down his stairs and checked the little shrine behind the barn. It was still in the same order as he had left it the day before. He touched a few items, making sure they were straight, and would withstand the wind, then he loped off at his warm-up pace, heading for the road and then the countryside.

Father Juan usually did his best thinking while out jogging. The mindlessness of the task, the rhythm of his feet slapping the ground, let his mind push in the clutch and just spin. The green of the country side, the blue of the morning sky, the call of the birds, the sound of tractors, the occasional wave of a farmer at work, all these things crossed his mind like stones skipping across a pond, creating waves of meaning that crossed and re-crossed, dissolving and reforming again and again.

He was out about two miles from town, slowly working his way around the roads, maybe 30 minutes into his run, when he noticed a sign on a farm that stopped him so quickly he almost fell over. He was so deep into his “running head” that it took him several seconds to figure out what it was that made him

stop. The sign said, Schmidt Family Farm, since 1923. The sign was pitted in spots but the paint was clean and the lettering had been recently redone by a neat hand. His eyes rested on the fine curves of the letter “S”. Like a kind of calligraphy, the letter alternated in thickness based on the brush stroke. The beauty of the lettering was arresting out here in the country. The country was supposed to be full of hicks. To Father Juan’s mind it was like seeing a diamond necklace on the neck of a pig. This was not the first time he had seen bits of heartbreaking beauty, of obvious cultured refinement, set against the plainness of the country.

All of this passed through Father Juan's mind as he stood there panting, wondering what it was about this sign that had stopped his thinking like a wooden shoe thrown into the gears of a machine. He looked back towards town and noticed the towering oak about a mile away, the place of his nap over a week ago. He let this idea skip off his mind without attaching any emotional significance to it, a gift of the runner’s mind still working while his body stayed in place. He glanced back at the letter “S” on the sign. For some reason the curve of the letter reminded him of something. Then it came to him. He walked back about 20 feet and saw another sign hung on the Schmidt’s fence. It was white with a red and black target in the center. The target had a cluster of holes near the middle, representing bullet holes. The text on the sign said, “These premises proudly protected by the Second Amendment.” The sign was small enough that he must have just glanced at it while running. As he looked closer, he noticed that one of the bullet holes was a little bit further out than the cluster in the middle, striking the edge of the second ring. For some reason that seemed like a map to him, like he was looking down from up high over the town and seeing a target painted on the ground. The bullet hole represented something but he couldn’t think of what. Why was one hole so far from the center he wondered? Then it hit him like a cold slap on the face.

He glanced around at the trees on the horizon to get his bearings and then took off at a full run for the church. The whole way back a part of his mind kept thinking how lucky he was that his legs were already warmed up or he would be doubled over with cramps by now.

He ran into the parish and slammed through the back door. Emily was already in the kitchen but Father Jacob was probably still in the parsonage.

“What in the Sam Hill,” Emily said as she heard him run by.

“Sorry,” said Father Juan shouted behind him. “I needed to see something.”

He ran to his cubicle and started up the computer. He stood over it, panting and sweaty, urging it to start up faster. When it finally finished booting, he

opened a connection to the internet and quickly found a map of the town. By this time Emily was looking over his shoulder wondering what he was doing. He sent the map to the printer in the central office and almost tripped over Emily in his hurry to get to it.

When the printer had finished his map, he set it on Emily's desk and looked at it closely. When he found the Schmidt farm, he marked its location on the map with a yellow highlighter that he borrowed from a cup on her desk. Working from memory, he marked Hans Müller's farm and Fred Meyers' as well.

"What are you doing?" Emily finally asked, a little put out at his behavior.

Just then Father Jacob walked in, carrying his coffee mug. Seeing his junior priest in his running clothes, sweaty and breathless, he asked, "Yes, what are you doing Father?"

Unfazed by their tone, Father Juan took a piece of string and a pen. He wrapped one end of the string to the pen and the other he held down on a spot on the map. By keeping the string length constant, he was able to draw a neat circle on the map which enclosed all three locations.

"Who else has had their well go dry," Father Juan asked?

"Huh?" said Emily and Father Jacob.

"I got Schmidt, Müller and Meyers already, said Father Juan, "but I need to know who else."

Father Jacob and Emily looked at each other and then back at Father Juan. "Bill Keim's well went out yesterday," said Father Jacob.

"Where's his farm," Father Juan asked?

Father Jacob studied the map for a bit and then pointed. "Right here," he said.

Father Juan marked the location, this time with a blue highlighter.

"Who else," he asked?

Working together the three of them marked two other locations on the map and had drawn several more circles, each larger than the last but all having the same center.

Father Juan stepped back from the map, feeling the last of his manic energy leave him like a balloon deflating. The map now looked like a target for use on a shooting range, like the sign he had seen at the Schmidt place. Three concentric circles were evenly spaced with little X's, like bullet holes marked within their boundaries. Suddenly Father Juan noticed he was standing in his sweats, in

middle of the church office and in bad need of a shower.

Sensing he was done, Father Jacob leaned over for a better look. "So what exactly are we looking at," he asked?

"It's a map of well failures," said Father Juan.

"So, why are there different colors? Why the rings?" asked Emily.

"Each ring represents a week of time," Father Juan said, leaning up against the desk as the fatigue of his morning's run hit him. "The further out from the center means a longer length of time."

"The colors were just to help me draw the rings."

Emily looked back at the map. "Oh, I get it," she said. "It's like the drying of the wells is spreading out in a circle, getting larger and larger each week."

"Exactly," said Father Juan.

"So that means anyone this far out," said Father Jacob, pointing to the last ring, "should have their wells run dry this week."

"If it follows the patterns so far, then yes," said Father Juan. "Do you know anyone who lives in that circle," he asked?

Father Jacob and Emily looked at each other. "The Brauns," said Emily. "Fender's farm too and a few others as well."

"Then what's..." asked Father Jacob, "what's at the middle of this map? It looks like the only thing out there is the old Seller's place."

Emily shook her head. "I don't know. For that matter, I don't know if any of this," she waived her hand at the map, "actually means anything. I keep remembering an old Ag. professor who used to always tells us, 'one or two data points, does not a trend make'."

"Hmm," said Father Jacob, hand on his chin. "I tend to agree. You think we need more data?"

"More like we need additional time," she said. "If this map is accurate, then we'll know soon enough."

"What bothers me," Emily continued, "is what this means. This looks deliberate, even premeditated. Only who would make wells go dry and why? Not to mention that how they go dry is impossible. None of this makes any sense."

They all shook their heads in agreement.

"Well," said Father Jacob, "I think this will sit here as good as anywhere," he said, as he pulled out a pin and stuck the map to the bulletin board behind

Emily's desk. "I say we keep our eyes and ears open and see if we have a trend or a fluke."

Emily and Father Juan nodded in agreement.

"In that case," said Father Jacob, "I have some work to do."

"And I," said Father Juan, "need to take a shower."

"Boy, I'll say," responded Emily. She waved her hand in front of her nose. "Phew!"

The three of them shared a laugh and then headed back into the sanctuary. Father Juan left while Father Jacob and Emily were pouring their second cup of coffee in the kitchen. It wasn't until he was home, in the shower, that he realized how lucky he was neither of them laughed at his map or thought his idea crazy. Just one more reason why I am so blessed he thought.

Whistling a tune, he quickly got dressed and headed back to his work and his friends.

## Chapter 27

By the time Father Juan finally escaped his pile of paperwork and made his rounds making sure the church was in good order, the sun was just starting to set. Twilight was always one of his favorite times, the red light seemed to make everything prettier, better. It was always easy to be an optimist at twilight.

Still enjoying the glow from his discovery that morning, Father Juan walked home lost in thought. A truck pulled up next to him and slowed to match his walking pace. After about 10 steps he noticed the truck and turned towards it, slightly startled to see who was driving.

It was Emily. "I was wondering how long it would take you to notice," she said, smiling through the truck's open window. "Want a lift?"

Still walking, Father Juan smiled back. "For this short a distance? Thanks, but I think I can walk this far without getting into trouble."

Emily frowned. "I was hoping," she said, "that you would want to come. I've been thinking about your map all day and thought it would be interesting to



check out the middle.”

“Hmm,” said Father Juan. “Why not? It’s close.” With that, he opened the still moving truck’s door and jumped in.

Emily asked, “Don’t you think that’s a bit dangerous?”

“What? Visiting a broken down house? You afraid you might suddenly wake up next to me under a tree?”

Emily was silent. Father Juan’s face suddenly turned red as he realized what he had just said. To cover his embarrassment, he started looking for the seatbelt which was stuck between the seat cushions.

“No, silly,” Emily finally spoke. “I was talking about jumping into a moving car.” She drove with her head pointing straight ahead. On her cheeks, two little points of red were plainly visible in the waning sunlight.

Father Juan clicked his seatbelt together and tightened the slack with a tug. “Oh that,” he said after a moment. “Believe it or not, I actually have a lot of practice safely getting into moving vehicles.”

She slowed down for a stop sign and turned on her turn signal. There were no other cars on the road. When the truck fully stopped, she turned her face to him before checking the road. “How so,” she asked?

“Well,” said Father Juan. “Let’s just say it’s a valuable, uh, skill set that one develops growing up in the barrio.”

“I’ll bet,” Emily said. “Still doesn’t make it safe.”

“You are, of course, right,” Father Juan replied as the truck slowed down under the large oak. Emily pulled to the side of the road and they both got out, leaving the doors open.

The light was fading but there was still enough to see. Father Juan and Emily walked up to the empty lot and inspected the broken down foundation. A week ago Father Juan remembered the house with a profound sense of loss; the promise of dreams built and then broken. But today, in the warm evening light, it seemed less hopeless and more promising, as if the foundation of a new home were contained within the bones of the old. House reincarnation: this idea made Father Juan chuckle.

“What,” Emily asked?

“Nothing,” said Father Juan. “I was just thinking how this house used to be a happy place for somebody and then it fell down. Only now these same stones could be taken up again and used to build a new house and make other people

happy. Make sense?”

“Perfectly.”

The couple stood in silence. All around them the empty lot came alive with sound and smell. Crickets played a happy tune while the tall weeds danced in the light warm breeze. The air carried the smells of flowers, rag weed, large trees and decay. It was the smell of life. The large oak whispered as the slight wind moved its scattered dry leaves together like a boisterous crowd of miniature fans quietly cheering the weeds down below.

After a while, Emily headed over to the well house. Father Juan followed but stopped short of the building. Emily stopped her inspection of the building long enough to turn around. Father Juan was standing in place ten yards away, staring into space, his face completely blank.

“What is it,” she asked?

“Nothing,” said Father Juan, shaking his head as if to scatter his thoughts. “I just had a premonition, a strong sense of *deja vu*. That’s all.”

“Well, you have been here before,” she said.

“Not that,” he said. “It wasn’t about being here before. More like being here in the future. Only it wasn’t *me* that was here but some other me, if that makes any sense.”

“Hmm, not really.”

“Good. I’d hate to be the only one confused,” he said with a smile.

“Well, misery *does* love company you know,” Emily said.

“That it does. That is does. Did you find anything interesting over there?”

“Only this,” Emily said as she pointed to the pipe exiting the well house. “Check this out. The pipe is completely dry and the well looks like it hasn’t run in years.”

“But?”

“But look under the pipe. See all these weeds? When a pump is running, the colder water will cause condensation on the outside of the pipe. This condensation will eventually drip down to the ground below, like a cold drink left out on the counter too long on a warm day. All that condensation makes a nice little place for weeds to grow. Anyone who’s lived with a well can tell you about the need to weed under them. As my father used to say, ‘they always grow tallest near the well-head’.”

Father Juan bent down to inspect the ground. When he parted the weeds with his hand, the soil was visibly darker under the pipe. He stood up and looked down the pipe. The pipe near the well house was old and rusted but after about 15 feet the pipe became clean, brand new. Some of the pieces still had price tags on them. Father Juan walked up to one and read the price. The pipe had been purchased from a big box hardware store. Looking down its length, the pipe crossed a large field and terminated at the back of a large building with the number 8 on its side. It was the new warehouse at the back of Alvarez Trucking.

“Well,” said Father Juan. “That’s pretty peculiar.”

“What,” said Emily?

Father Juan pointed down the length of pipe. “That,” he said.

“Oh.”

“What do you suppose *that* means,” Father Juan asked.

“Heck if I know,” she replied. “Here's an old well that doesn't work but is obviously pumping or it's a pipe connecting one lot to the next. Either explanation is just as weird as the other.”

“Well, one thing is for sure,” said Father Juan. “Nobody would buy this much pipe if they thought the well didn't work.”

“Maybe it's something else,” said Emily. “Maybe the well is working, just not like it used to.”

“What do you mean?”

“Something Father Jacob taught me. A well is nothing more than a pipe in the ground with a pump. Just because it pulls water out of the ground doesn't mean it has to.”

“You mean,” said the priest, “you think Alvarez is pumping something *into* the ground, not out of it?”

“It's possible,” she said. “And it does make sense, some kind of sense, at least. More sense than a broken pump with no electricity pumping water out.”

“Hmm...” said Father Juan. “You don't think he pumping something illegal do you? Dumping chemicals into the ground or something?”

Emily looked thoughtful for a moment. “To be honest, that doesn't make sense,” she said.

“I agree,” he replied. “I mean, why go through all the expense of laying this

pipe, when he could have simply dug a well on his own lot? And it's not even covered up. You would think if he was going to do something nefarious, he would at least cover his tracks."

"Not that," Emily said. "What I meant was Alvarez doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who would do something illegal. At least not like this. I'll bet he even bought the water rights for this lot. He seems like that kind of guy and that's a fairly common practice around here. Nope. I don't like it. Nothing about any of this makes any sense."

The couple had been staring at the Alvarez warehouse. Emily turned towards Father Juan, only to find him looking at her with a huge smile.

"What," she said?

"Weren't you just saying something about misery and company?"

"Shut up!" she said, giving his shoulder a playful slug.

"Hey," he said holding his arm. "I'm just glad I'm not the only one feeling a little crazy. That's all."

"So misery *does* love company," she asked?

"Of course," he replied. "Common. Misery also loves dinner and I'm getting hungry."

They walked back towards the truck, its doors still open. As they got closer Father Juan was suddenly struck with a memory.

"Do you remember Montoya Consuello," he asked?

"Who?"

"The man, the Mexican who died in our church the first week I was there."

"Oh, yes," she said. "How can I forget?"

"I just remembered how he left his truck sitting in the middle of the church parking lot with the doors opened." Father Juan indicated the doors on Emily's truck.

"Now I get it. Looks a little too familiar," she said?

"Si."

"You know," she continued. "You're pretty dark sometimes."

"Welcome to my world," he replied. He had a smile on his lips but fatigue in his eyes. "Welcome to my world."

They both got into the truck. She started the engine, put her hand on the

shift and stopped. She turned to him. “About tonight,” she said. “You mentioned something about dinner but I just remembered it's my night to pick up the twins and feed them.”

“That’s okay,” said Father Juan. “I really didn’t mean tonight. Besides I have a phone call I have to make, actually two calls. I need to apologize to someone.”

“Well that sounds like fun,” Emily said with sarcasm.

Father Juan snorted. “Can I take a rain check,” he asked? “ I really do know how to cook, you know.”

“I don’t know....”

“Don’t get me wrong. It’s not a date thing...”

“I didn’t think...”

He held up his hand to stop her. “Look. I’m just asking a friend to come over for dinner, nothing more. You can bring Lisa if you like. In fact, I wish you would. It’ll be fun.”

Emily looked into the distance for a while and then shifted the truck into gear.

“Okay,” she said as the truck started off. “How’s next Tuesday sound?”

“Perfect,” he replied. “Perfect.”

## Chapter 28

The phone picked up after the second ring. “Dellarosa,” came the voice, sharp, hard, no non-sense – almost like the bark of a dog.

“Good evening, Lieutenant. This is Father Juan Delgado from the Holy Family Church down in Nazareth. I hope I’m not calling too late.”

“Hola Father Juan,” said the lieutenant after a second, and with more warmth. “I was just sitting down to dinner but I have some time. What can I do for you?”

Father Juan could hear high pitched voices in the background and the sounds of clinking dishes and silverware, the sounds of a family at the dinner table. Father Juan sat at his own small table in his dark apartment. The light was off

because he was too tired to turn it on when he first came in. Now the darkness felt in stark contrast to the sounds on the phone.

"Father," asked the voice again?

"I'm sorry Lieutenant. I didn't mean to disturb your meal."

"That's okay Father," the lieutenant said.

Father Juan heard the sound of a door closing, followed by the creak of an office chair protesting its use. From the absence of children's noise, he guessed the lieutenant was now sitting at a desk in a home office.

"Then I'll make this brief," said Father Juan. "Do you remember Montoya Consuello?"

"Isn't he the man who died in your church," asked the lieutenant?

"Yes Lieutenant, he is... was."

The lieutenant said nothing, waiting for Father Juan to continue.

"Well, I remembered him saying something that didn't make all that much sense at the time but I think it makes sense now."

"What's that, Father," asked the lieutenant?

"He mentioned his 'jefe' was taking over Nazareth. Said he was going to run the town. At the time it didn't make sense. I mean there is nothing here to run. It's a small town and almost no illegal drugs – same for crime. There's simply no territory to take over."

Father Juan paused for a second. "Do you see much gang activity up there in Amarillo, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Father, quite a bit."

"Then you know what it looks like when a gang moves in on another gang's turf," asked the priest?

"Oh yes, Father. It's a real mess. That's usually when we see the murder rate go up, along with the mayor's and the chief's blood pressure."

"Exactly," said the priest. "That's my experience too."

"*Your* experience, Father," said the lieutenant? "Does the Catholic Church run gangs now?"

In spite of his serious mood, Father Juan had to laugh. "I take it you've never run across Jesuits." Both men laughed then Father Juan continued, "You know," he said, when he could catch his breath. "I never thought of it before but now

that you mention it, the church *is* pretty similar to a gang isn't it?"

"More like the other way round, Father," the lieutenant said dryly, "but I had noticed a similarity."

Father Juan let out another snort. "Well, I grew up in an area where gangs are considered normal, so I guess you could say I have some experience in the matter."

"Okay," said the lieutenant. "So what's up?"

"Well," said the priest gathering his thoughts, "like I said, his confession didn't make any sense. There's no crime to take over. That's not how a small town like this makes money."

"Agreed," said the lieutenant.

"But, today something happened that made me start thinking about Senior Consuello's confession again. I know how a gang takes over the turf of another gang. They go after the drug sales. Well, I started asking myself, what if there were no illegal drugs to take over? Assuming what Senior Consuello said was true, how would a jefe go about taking over a town like Nazareth? That's when it hit me, its not about the drugs but about the cash flow. That's why you go after another gang's turf, to get the cash flow. So when I thought of that I realized there was something in Nazareth worth taking over. The cash flow in Nazareth is farming."

"Farming, Father?" the lieutenant said. "You're telling me there's a gang in Nazareth trying to take over the farms?" He started laughing out loud.

Father Juan waited patiently for him to stop. After the lieutenant finished laughing, Father Juan continued. "I know it sounds crazy but let me finish here."

"Okay," said the lieutenant, still giggling. "I'm all ears."

"Let's see here," said Father Juan looking at a calendar. "Four weeks ago one of the wells in town went dry." The lieutenant started to say something but Father Juan cut him off. "I know, I know. Wells go dry in Texas. There is a point here, let me finish." After a moment he continued. "A week later Montoya Consuello confesses his boss is up to something and then promptly dies in my church. That same week two other wells go dry and the next week three more. The week after that even more wells end up dry."

"So there's a drought, Father. I know they don't have droughts in the barrio but they happen out here in Texas all the time."

"Yes," said the priest, "except these wells are different. If you take a map and draw where the wells are, you will see a pattern start to develop. The wells

all go dry in a ring. Each week that ring expands about a half mile or so and has, consistently, for the past four weeks.

“Hmm,” said the lieutenant. “That does sound peculiar. You’re telling me the wells are going dry in an ever expanding ring.”

“Yes, Lieutenant. Also it doesn’t matter how deep the wells are or if they are new or not. If they are in that ring, they go dry.”

“Could this be a mechanical thing? Are the pumps failing or something?”

“Possibly, but I don’t think so. We have a man here who is an expert mechanic and he has gone over each and every pump that failed. He says he can get the pumps to work but there is no water to bring up.”

“Really,” asked the lieutenant? “Who is this mechanic? Do I know him?”

“He’s the senior priest at Holy Family,” said Father Juan.

“A priest who is also an expert mechanic,” said the lieutenant? “Now I’ve heard everything.”

“You’d be surprised what some of the priests can do,” said Father Juan. “We’re not always on our knees in prayer, you know.”

“I suppose not,” said the lieutenant. “I just never thought.... Well, I guess you learn something new every day.” After a moment, he continued, “so the wells check out fine and they are plenty deep enough?”

“Yes,” said Father Juan.

“Hmm,” said the lieutenant. “You said the wells are failing in a ring, a circle. Does this circle have a center by any chance?”

“Yes,” said the priest. “It does in fact have a center.” Father Juan told him about the empty lot and the pipe leading to the Alvarez Trucking warehouse.

“So you think this Alvarez guy has something to do with the wells drying up,” asked the lieutenant?

“That’s the thing. I know it sounds crazy but he did just start a new business and the well does lead to his warehouse.”

“That’s not a whole lot to go on,” said the lieutenant. “And it doesn’t make much sense anyway. If he was going to take over the farming wouldn’t he be buying up the land once the wells went dry?”

“That’s what I thought too, only I think he has another plan.”

“Which is...?”



“Well, right after the first well went dry, Senior Alvarez met up with my boss and told him he needed new drivers. The illegals he was hiring were not doing a good job, so he wanted to hire local drivers who knew the area better.”

“How many farmers has he hired?”

“Everyone who has asked so far.”

“So he’s hiring every farmer whose well has gone dry,” said the lieutenant? “That doesn’t sound like a take-over to me. It sounds like he’s helping them out.”

“Yes it does,” said the priest. “Except.... Let me ask you Lieutenant. If you were planning on shipping something illegal into America from Mexico would having American drivers, local Texans, make much of a difference?”

“I would think so,” said the lieutenant. “You think he’s making the wells go dry to get Anglo drivers,” the lieutenant asked? “That’s a bit of a stretch, don’t you think, Father?”

“Yes, in fact I do,” said the priest. “Only, it’s the only thing that makes sense so far. Maybe I’m missing something important which is always possible but that is what it feels like to me.”

“So what do you want me to do,” asked the lieutenant?

“Can you see if there is anything on Alvarez, a criminal record or something? If he has a past history of gang related or drug related work, it might make more sense.”

“You know Father, it’s not exactly legal or ethical, for that matter, for me to investigate law abiding citizens and then pass on that information to the public.”

“Yes, Lieutenant, I know. Just like it is not exactly legal or ethical for me to pass on what was said in a confession to local law enforcement. Now if I were to happen to accidentally mention something to a friend why that would be different wouldn’t it? I mean that is what friends do, right? The priest paused for a second. “But please understand, Lieutenant, as a citizen, I don’t need to know a thing about Alvarez or his activities. However, as a cop, I suspect you might. This isn’t about you telling me something. This is about you knowing something. Si?”

“Ah, yes,” said the lieutenant. “I see your point.”

“I thought you might,” said the priest.

“Well, I’ll see what I can do... as a friend. I’ll make no promises, though.”

“That's fine, Lieutenant,” said the priest. “And thank you. I appreciate you taking time away from your family to listen.”

“De nada, Father, it's nothing.”

## Chapter 29

Father Juan hung up the phone and stared into space. His apartment was fully dark now, lit only by the green glow of the clock on his microwave and the soft reflected light of the moon through the window. He had never smoked a cigarette in his life, yet he suddenly felt a strange desire to do so. I guess if I smoked, he thought to himself, now would be a good time. For some reason he could visualize his hand holding a cigarette, see the smoke billowing in the air over the table, smell the pungent order, even see the half-full ashtray clearly. He remembered that ashtray as a gift from his older brother to celebrate the day he got out of prison for the second time. It was thick glass, circular, with the words “Proud Member, Folsom Prison Class of 98” printed on the bottom in bold letters.

Only his older brother had died the day he turned 16 and Father Juan had never been to prison.

The vision left a sickness growing in his gut, a kind of mental nausea. Like a crack in the dam holding back a sea of grey darkness, the mixed up swirling id, reeling and pulling inside his bones. Already wave upon wave was splashing over the top, the cracks in the dam enlarging with every thrust. It was only a matter of time until... until.

Until what? He asked himself. What have I ever gone through that God has not sustained me? The wave in his head subsided. The vision of the ashtray and cigarette smoke went with it. The smell lingered for a while but even it eventually left.

Feeling calm, Father Juan walked over the hallway and turned on the light. The neat rows of pictures looked down upon him. His own cheering section, he thought. He lovingly caressed each frame remembering the person smiling back from within and how much each one had helped him. He felt a calmness come over him, right down to his spine, a centering. His shoulders relaxed, the tension

slipping off him like a discarded backpack. He took a deep breath, walked into his room, got down on his knees, crossed himself and prayed.

An hour later he got up and fixed himself some dinner. His bones were humming with the thought that of all the people in the world, he had seen the grace of God, made clearly manifest more often than any other man. He could not believe his luck.

Once his simple meal was ready, he picked up the phone again and made another call.

“Hello Tia,” he said when he heard the phone answered. “I called to apologize for last night.”

“Oh, Mijo, you don’t need to apologize for that,” she said. “You are family. You can call anytime you like.”

“Yes Tia, you are right, I am family to you,” the priest replied. “But that does not excuse my behavior. Even my favorite aunt should not be abused at midnight by my fears.”

“Do you feel better today,” she asked?

“Yes and no. I had another vision today while I was sitting in the dark, just after getting off the phone. It was like looking through the eyes of another man who was me, but not me, if that makes any sense. This other me was smoking a cigarette, had been to prison twice. He could remember talking to Carlos, my older brother, just last week; crazy stuff.”

“Didn’t Carlos die long ago?”

“Twenty-five years or so, back when I was 16.”

“Hmm,” she said. “That does sound pretty crazy. He is not talking to you or telling you anything was he?”

“No Tia. It’s not a schizophrenic kind of thing, at least I don’t think so. It’s not a voice in my head. It’s like peering into another life, my life. Only in that other life I’m not a priest and have little discipline. My own doppelgänger as it were. He is the same Jaime Delgado but he is not Father Juan, if that makes any sense.”

“Not really. Could it be just too much stress or exercise or something?”

“Who knows?” said the priest. “I’m not really an expert on mental illness.”

“So you think you have a mental illness,” she asked, worry plainly evident in her voice?

“No Tia,” he said with a slight chuckle. “I do not think I am going crazy. But I am also not sure exactly what I am going through.”

“Do you think it has anything to do with your gift,” she asked?

“You mean as el Ángel de la Muerte?”

“I hate it when you call yourself that,” she said.

“I know Tia. I’m sorry for teasing you. And no, I don’t think it’s part of my ‘gift’ but I really wouldn’t know that either, would I?”

“I suppose not. Has this ever happened before?”

“No, at least not until the other day on Christmas Eve.”

“Well what happened on Christmas Eve?”

“I went for a jog and then fell asleep under a tree.”

You fell asleep while jogging,” she asked? “Why?”

“That I don’t know,” he said. “I was out jogging and then the next thing I remember it was noon and I was waking up under this large oak tree near... Wait a minute! That oak tree, it’s the same one....”

“Listen Tia,” he said excitedly. “I gotta go. There’s something I have to see.”

“Uh, sure Mijo,” she said, her tone anything other than sure. “Are you sure? I mean...”

“It’s okay Tia, I’m fine. Really!”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. In fact, never felt better.”

“Ooh, that reminds me. I need to tell you something really quickly.”

“Okay, but make it quick, I want to look at that tree again.”

“Um, okay, quickly. I forgot to tell you last night but the other day I ran into someone we both knew from the old parish. Do you remember Pepe Romero? He used to come to church on and off with his cousin Lucinda back when you first started there.”

“Hmm, not off the top of my head,” he said.

“Are you sure? He said you would remember him. Something about his confession after church...”

The memory hit the priest like flood. It was his first year at the new parish, just out of seminary. Pepe was tall and dark, a close cousin who grew up in the

same barrio as Father Juan. He was also his gangbanger. Pepe had approached the priest right after the service to ask about his family. He hadn't gotten past his first question before his face contorted into what Father Juan now knew to be the first signs of the moving of the Holy Spirit. Then he fell to his knees and began to loudly confess to murdering a man, and framing the man's girlfriend for the crime.

Father Juan remembered standing outside the church, feeling both embarrassed as his cousin confessed to the most terrible of sins and horrified that his secret past had somehow come back to haunt him. At that time he had convinced himself that the occasional confession was just a fluke, something from his youth in the barrio. The years in seminary had sheltered him from the criminal elements in his past and he had wrongly concluded that part of his life was over. Certainly he had prayed hard enough for that. Standing and holding the hands of a man on his knees, begging for God's forgiveness, while the crowds of people coming out of the church silently flowed slowly around them was almost too much for the young priest.

Fortunately, his senior father was quick witted and truly a humble man of God. Ignoring the crowd, the senior priest approached him and asked if he could help. Somehow Father Juan was able to convey the need for his bible and Holy Water. The priest responded with a level of calmness and grace that touched Father Juan to this day. He quickly returned with Father Juan's bible (even bookmarked to the proper page) and had cleverly grabbed a common bowl out of the church's kitchen, to scoop up some Holy Water from the back of the church. His actions calmed the rising panic in Father Juan's heart and gave him the courage to get down on his knees to minister to his cousin. He not only heard Pepe's confession but also gave him his last rights as well.

That was almost 20 years ago and the first confession he had heard since going into seminary.

Father Juan surfaced from his memory. "Yes. I remember him," he said. His voice little more than a rasp.

"He thought you might," she said. "He came by the parish on a weekday and asked around for me. He remembered you and I used to be close, so he figured I might know how to find you. He was right.

"And get this," she continued. "He's an O.F.M. cap."

"What?" said the priest. "He's, well, I don't know what to say. You say he's alive, and a Capuchin?"

"Oh yes, even had the robes and everything."

“But how can that be,” said the priest in confusion? “How can he even be alive?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “but I figured you would want to know. He’s moving up to Wisconsin to teach at the Capuchin High School there, the one Friar Casey came from. He gave me his number and asked if you could call him if you’re not too busy.”

“Too busy,” said the priest? “How could I be too busy to talk to my cousin? I’m still surprised he’s alive. How did that happen?”

“He wouldn’t say, funny enough. He popped in, gave me his number and popped out. He didn’t seem to be in a hurry. He just didn’t want to talk much, I guess. You know how close-lipped Capuchins can get.”

“Well my, my, now you’ve got me curious. What’s his number?”

Father Juan wrote down the number while finishing up his conversation. It was getting late, especially for back east, so he left the number on his table as a reminder to call in the morning. Glancing at his watch, he decided it was too late tonight to go back out to the Sellman’s place. That could wait for another day.

Instead he decided to finish the night in prayer and contemplation. There was a lot for him to pray about.

## Chapter 30

*(Tuesday, 1/18)*

For several weeks Father Juan found himself busy at the church. He had called Pepe Romero the very next morning but he had not been in. Father Juan left a message and then tried hard to forget about it. He had also gone out to the old Seller’s place but nothing seemed any different than what he had seen before and he could not remember what had made him urgently wish to go out there to begin with.

The wells in town continued to dry up, following the same predictable circular pattern. The two priests and Emily kept their map to themselves, hoping to find some kind of reason, some logical explanation for what they were seeing.

In the mean time, children were born, old people died and the town continued

on its own sleepy path. The number of Latinos at Sunday mass continued to increase, keeping Father Juan busier than ever. He also noticed something new while out jogging. Farmers would now wave to him from their tractors as he ran by their fields. parishioners would give a friendly honk and a wave as they passed him on the road. In town he would receive shouts of encouragement on the street and at the basketball games he would get high-fives and slaps on the back from people he barely knew. It was a very different experience from what he was used to and the priest found himself both excited and flustered by the attention.

A casual comment over lunch one day reminded Father Juan that he had promised Emily a home cooked meal. Later that night, when they were locking up the church, he reminded her. "I still owe you a meal you know," he said as he closed the front blinds.

"Owe," Emily asked as she latched the front door? "I don't remember you owing me anything, certainly not a meal."

"Don't give me that," he said with a mischievous grin. "I saw the way you rolled your eyes when I said I can cook."

"Well, you are a man and a bachelor at that," she said with equal humor. "I suppose that means you are competent at burning eggs and bacon and you might be able to operate a grill without severe bodily harm."

"See? See what I mean," the priest said in mock seriousness. "Now you have made it a matter of personal honor." Somehow I managed to look both affronted and happy at the same time.

"And I suppose," she said with one eyebrow arched, "that I will now be forced to consume sub-standard food to appease your Latin honor?"

"Yes," he said. "After all, honor is everything to a Latino."

Emily closed the last back window and turned to him. "So when does this mockery of cooking take place?"

"I was thinking this Thursday, after basketball practice."

"Ah, so you wanted Lisa to suffer too?"

"That's the plan. After all, she did volunteer to chaperone you and with the casual way you trample on the honor of a gentleman, I can see the need to have an objective observer."

Emily gave a snort and then giggled. "Okay then. That gives us plenty of time to eat a decent meal first. What time should we come over? Eight?"

“That works.”

“Is there anything I can bring?”

“Your daughter and an appetite.”

“Besides that?”

“Nope.”

“Great. I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

“Adios,” said Father Juan walking around the back, as Emily got into her truck. “See you tomorrow.”

Walking home, Father Juan began to whistle.

Carne asada or enchiladas,” Father Juan asked?

“Excuse me,” the voice sounded on the other side of the phone? “Is that any way to open a conversation?”

“It is with me,” the priest replied.

“I see you are still the rude niño I met long ago.”

“Yes, Tia, I am and you are dodging the question. Carne asada or enchiladas?”

“Hmm,” she said. “Who’s it for?”

“Emily, the parish secretary.”

“A girl, Miho? You met a girl?”

“A woman, Tia, a friend, not a girl. I told you about her.”

“Yes, you did but you can’t blame an auntie for trying, can you?”

“No Tia.”

“Smart boy. So carne asada or enchiladas, eh? Are you trying to impress this Emily?”

“No. At least not like that. She’s a friend, Tia. Besides, her daughter is coming too.”

“Ah,” she said, thinking for a moment. “Can they handle serious chilies or are they gringos?”



“I don’t know,” the priest responded honestly. “But this is Texas after all, not Maine or Chicago. I’m pretty sure they can take some hot.”

“How about your mother’s molé then,” she asked? That’s an unusual dish. It’s not too hot and you do it some justice.”

“Hmm,” said the priest. “I’ll need to see if I can get some decent cocoa around here, but I like it. Thanks Tia. Did I tell you were the best aunt in the world?”

“Not today, miho.”

“Well you are. Thanks again.”

“Adios miho.”

“Adios, Tia.”

## Chapter 31

*(Thursday, 1/20)*

Two nights later found Father Juan, Emily and Lisa sitting around his small apartment table holding their bellies and grinning like fools. Empty dishes lay on the table and stacked in the kitchen. The plates were not quite licked clean but darn close. Out of the peaceful quiet, Emily let out a loud and satisfying belch.

“Mom!” It was the first word Lisa has spoken once the food hit her plate. Somehow she managed to make that one word sound like it had 14 syllables.

“I’m just paying proper respect,” Emily said with another small belch, “to the chef.” She let out a deep sigh.

“So you admit now, I can cook,” Father Juan asked?

Both ladies nodded their heads happily.

“Then I suppose my honor is returned,” he said.

“Well, about that,” said Emily. “This was an incredible meal and I’ve never tasted molé so good but, to be fair, one data point does not a trend make.”

“Meaning,” asked the priest?

“Meaning, one meal is simply not enough. I’d need a larger sample to make

any definite conclusions. If we're going to be objective about this, I need to try several more meals before I can safely conclude you're not a complete moron in the kitchen."

"Mother!"

"It's okay, Lisa," Father Juan said. "I understand what she's doing. She's trying to fool me into cooking more meals for her. Am I right, Emily?"

"Darn," said Emily, snapping her fingers. "I almost had you."

"Ha," the priest responded. "I may have been born at night but I wasn't born *last* night."

They all laughed.

Father Juan got up and started picking up plates. "Who's up for desert," he asked?

Emily and Lisa both let out a groan in protest.

"That wasn't a no," he said, as he set the plates into his sink.

Just then the doorbell rang.

"Can you get that, Lisa," Father Juan asked? "I need to get your mom another beer."

Father Juan grabbed two more beers out of the refrigerator, popped their tops with a bottle opener and set them on the table.

"Kill me now," Emily said, still holding her belly, "so I can die happy."

"Um" Lisa said from the door. Father Juan looked up to see Lisa holding open the door and Mali standing on the other side. Mali's face was in such a state of shock that he looked like he could have been knocked over with a feather.

Father Juan forgot what the effects of a pretty girl could do to a teenage boy, especially if caught by surprise. He had invited Mali up for desert but had forgotten to mention there would be company, female company, suspecting the poor lad might be too shy to come if he knew it was a trap. Chiding himself for the lapse, he set down his beer and quickly came around the table to the boy's rescue. "Mali," he said with obvious warmth, "Come on in. Come in."

Father Juan put his arm around the boy's shoulders, as if to protect him from his own shyness and practically pulled him into the room. Emily stood up and soon all four were standing around the table.

"Mali," Father Juan said, "I believe you know Lisa Hoffman."

Lisa gave a small wave. Mali nodded back, not daring to speak.

“And this is Lisa’s mother, Emily Hoffman.”

Mali held out his hand and gave Emily a desultory shake.

“Emily,” Father Juan continued, with one hand still on Mali’s shoulder, “Mali is my neighbor and my friend but, best of all, I think he is the best basketball player in Nazareth.”

Mali was just sitting down when Father Juan said this. Immediately his face went scarlet.

Taking pity on Mali, Emily laid her hand on his across the table. “Father Juan,” she said, in a sharp tone. “Don’t pick on the poor boy.”

Father Juan returned from the kitchen holding a large pan of homemade flan. “Pick on him,” he said in mock seriousness. “Hardly, and he is no boy. I can assure you. That *boy* has been cleaning up the court with my ass for weeks. I’d let *you two* on the court with him,” he said while pointing at both ladies with a serving spoon, “to see for yourselves but I’m afraid that your delicate constitutions would not survive the ordeal. Boy? Hah!”

This last part was emphasized by setting four dishes onto the table.

“Now, who is for some flan? Come on, now. I haven’t got all week.”

Mali grabbed a bowl and set it down in front of Father Juan. “You’ve been talking about this flan for weeks,” he said. “It better be worth the hype.”

“Now that’s the spirit,” Father Juan said as he dished him a large scoop.

“Emily?”

“In for a penny...” she said, sliding a dish over to him.

After he dished a large glop for her he turned to the far end of the table.

“Lisa,” he said, his hand hovering over the pan?

“Why not,” she said? “If it’s as good as the molé, then I’m in for a treat.”

“It’s better,” Father Juan said without a trace of modesty.

He was right.

After the flan was finished (Lisa and Mali even had seconds), the dishes were stacked in the kitchen and Father Juan with Emily’s help started placing them into his small dishwasher. The two watched as Lisa and Mali talked. The younger boy had gotten over his initial shock, probably because of the massive sugar load now in his bloodstream and was able to hold a conversation without being seemingly terminally shy. The two adults looked at each other and smiled, remembering when they were young, and talking with the opposite sex held so

much fear and excitement.

Once the dishes were cleared up, Father Juan looked at the time. It was only 8:45. "Hey," he said. "Since everyone but me is already in sweats and tennis shoes are y'all up for a quick game?"

Lisa groaned while Emily politely said no. Mali looked terrified. All in all, Father Juan thought, this was a good sign.

"Ah, come on. You bunch of chickens. We'll take it slow for the senior citizens here," this was said as he pointed towards Emily. "What do ya say?"

Not waiting for the others to say no, Father Juan slipped into the bathroom to change. When he came out, he could tell the idea was starting to catch hold.

"Come on," he said, grabbing his ball. "I'll take it easy on you."

The others followed him down the stairs and around to the front of the barn. The lights were already on, so Father Juan dribbled out to the free throw line and started taking shots. Once the other three were out on the court, Father Juan made them each take 4-5 shots at the basket to warm up.

"How about we start with a game of Duh," he asked? "It's the same as Horse, only you shoot for three letters D, U, H, instead of five. Lisa can shoot first." He bounce- passed the ball to Lisa before she could respond.

"Where do we start from," she asked?

Father Juan shrugged.

Mali said, "Anywhere on the court."

"Oh, you're going to regret that," Lisa said with a smile, as she walked out to the three point line. "I've got a good three-pointer. I hope you boys can spell."

With these words she casually raised the ball and gave it a toss. The ball arced nicely and came down on the front of the rim. It then bounced up, touched the backboard and then fell back into the chain net.

Father Juan let out a whistle as the ball bounced slowly out to the free-throw line. He stepped over to it and picked it up. Then he passed it to Mali with a smile. "Care to show the ladies what a real three-pointer looks like," he asked?

Mali dribbled over, his back to the basket, until he reached where Lisa stood. For a second he stood there giving her a laconic smile, then in one smooth motion he spun around, jumped up and tossed the ball high in the air. It came down right in the middle of the net with a swoosh.

After a few seconds of stunned silence, Emily was the first to speak. "I have

to shoot after *that*,” she asked? “ I can see I should have brought a can of shark repellent.”

They all laughed as she dribbled out to the same spot. But when she turned around her face was all business. She looked at the basket, her face showing a fierce concentration then she suddenly relaxed and tossed the ball with an easy practiced throw. The ball grazed the backboard and dropped into the hoop, barely touching one side of the rim.

Father Juan chased the ball and dribbled to the same spot. He was grinning from ear to ear even before he set up for his shot. His toss went too far to the right bouncing off the rim but he didn't care. He was having fun.

An hour later all four of them were drenched in sweat and sat with their backs to the barn in an exhausted heap. They had switched from playing Duh to two-on-two, first playing boys against girls and later playing the kids against the senior citizens. As Father Juan had expected, Mali started off playing very well. His passing skills were weak, mostly because he hadn't played with a team before but his shooting skills and the way he dominated the court was impressive. Both ladies played smart as well as hard so it was only a matter of time until they learned to play around Mali instead of through him. Once they did, the points quickly added up. In the end, the level of game play was pretty evenly matched.

Father Juan sat in silence while the other three animatedly recounted the games, talking about what worked and what didn't. Mali was not used to a post-game debrief but both ladies knew the process backwards and forwards, having played on many successful teams. Soon Mali figured out what was going on and was speaking up and asking questions.

The light from the top of the barn shown down but was cut off by the edge of the roof, so where they sat, their heads were in shadow. The light reflected off the smooth dirt was just bright enough to show the glow in their eyes and the grins on their faces as they spoke but not much more. Father Juan smiled enjoying the sense of belonging. Letting the peaceful feeling work its way into his bones and relax his mind; feeling it start to wander.

Father Juan had never complained about the cost of being a priest but sometimes he wondered what his life would have been like if he stayed out of the priesthood and had raised a family. “Is this what it's like being in a family?” he asked himself. He just smiled and looked up to the stars.

The sound of the kitchen door opening broke his train of thought. It was Mali's mother coming out to check on him. She left the kitchen door open but

closed the screen door behind her. The winter air was cool enough to be welcomed in the hot kitchen. As she walked out, the light from the kitchen shown on the far end of the courtyard, creating a crazy rectangle of light that eventually was overwhelmed by the barn's light. She held a hand up over her eyes to better peer into the shadows. "Mali," she called in her slight accent. "Is that you?"

Father Juan got up and stepped into the light so she could see him. "He's here, Mrs. Malitola," he said. After months and several checks written to her for the rent, he still could not pronounce her name properly.

Mali stepped out of the shadow. "Yes ma?"

"Did you get your homework done," his mother asked?

"Yes mother. I did it right after school."

"And did you study for your test tomorrow?"

"Yes mother. Father Juan helped me with the spelling words but I didn't need any help with the algebra."

By this time all four of them had stepped out of the shadows and were walking towards Mrs. Malieitolula. "Oh," she said when she noticed Lisa. Pretty young girls around her son was something she didn't see often. "I didn't want to interrupt your game."

"Its okay, mom," Mali said. "Besides I think we're about done. I know I am."

Father Juan was just about to introduce his guests to Mrs. Malieitolula when a shock went through his soul like a knife into his chest. He looked around wildly and then noticed a car slowing down and turning into the drive way at the house. "Stay here," he said to Lisa and Emily. Then he turned to Mali, "Get your mother inside. Quickly!"

## Chapter 32

Sensing something was wrong, Mali ran up to his mom and all but shoved her into the house. "What? What is it?" she kept asking but Mali didn't heed her questions. He just kept pushing her until they entered the kitchen and the door was closed.

Emily and Lisa ran back to the shadows, Emily suddenly searching for her purse.

Father Juan noted this out of the corner of his eye but most of his attention was taken up by the car as it drove up the drive way. The car stopped about twenty feet from Father Juan. The driver got out but left the lights on, blinding Father Juan as they shown in his eyes. He was a tall man, big with long blonde hair and a goatee. He wore jeans over cowboy boots and a black leather vest over a dirty white t-shirt. The car's radio was loudly playing a rock song, the music out of place with the quiet of the courtyard. Dust from the vehicle drifted up into the cars headlights. The man's face was fierce, even angry. His eyes dark, deep set in his skull with the skin around them pulled back in concentration, almost like a hawk.

After the man stepped out of the car, he pulled out a shotgun from the backseat. He stood behind the still open door, the gun, for now at least, crooked casually over his right arm pointing down into the dirt as if it were a reasonable thing to go hunting at 10:00 at night at a strangers house.

Father Juan could feel something, a shifting in his soul. It was not a new feeling.

The man puffed on a cigarette and blew out an exaggerated puff of smoke. "I'm looking for a priest," he said confidently, "A Father Juan. You know where I can find him?"

Father Juan was just about to speak when Emily shouted from behind him, "What do you want!" She was walking up, carrying a pistol in both hands, the way he had seen cops do on TV shows. She held her gun with a sense of ease that spoke of many hours of practice. Why is it, Father Juan thought to himself, that some Texans are better armed then the gang bangers he knew? He let out a sigh. "Emily," he said. "Put that thing down. You'll hurt him."

The man with the shotgun thought this was funny. "Yes, Emily," he said with a mocking tone as he raised his gun. "You don't want to hurt me do you?"

Emily looked at him and back to Father Juan.

"It's okay," said Father Juan, holding up his hands as if to placate her.

Emily stared at him for a second, anger clear in her eyes. Then she relaxed and lowered her gun. She kept it pointing at the ground but didn't drop it.

"That's better," said the man with the gun, as if it was his idea. "Let me know where the priest is and no one needs to get hurt."

Father Juan grunted at this. "It's a bit too late for that," he said as he turned

fully towards the man.

“What do you mean,” said the man as he raised the shotgun closer to the priest’s direction?

“You’ll find out soon enough, son,” said Father Juan sadly.

“So where is this priest,” the man asked?

“Right here,” said Father Juan quietly. “I’m Father Juan.”

At this, the man raised his gun, pointing it directly at Father Juan. There was no mistaking his intent.

“I hope you don’t mind, Padre,” the man said. “After all, business is business. I’m supposed to tell you something before I pull the trigger.”

Father Juan waited calmly. He watched the dust in the headlights settle and felt the weight of all the stars on his shoulders.

“I...” the man said. Suddenly he stopped as if he had been slapped. A look of concern came over his face and he raised one hand to his throat. “I... I’m supposed to tell... tell you something.” His breath was suddenly labored and sweat broke out on his forehead. “I...”

“What is it son?” Father Juan asked, his voice quiet and strangely calm.

“I, I, Oh God father,” the man stuttered almost as if he were vomiting the words. I, I have been a bad man. I have done... things.”

Suddenly, the man doubled over, as if punched in the stomach. He looked down at the shotgun in his hands and threw it away as if it were a snake about to bite him.

Father Juan walked slowly towards the man around the still open car door and bent down to his level. “Tell me,” he said. “Tell me everything. It’s the only way to stop the pain.”

The man looked at him, his eyes huge with panic, and then he started crying. “Oh God, Father. I’ve done so many things...”

The man fell to the ground sobbing and Father Juan got down on his knees beside him, holding him in his arms, rocking back and forth to calm his distress. Emily approached the two and appeared over the top of the car door, still holding her gun.

“Just inside my door is a back-pack,” Father Juan said quietly to her. “Inside it is a bible and a bottle of holy water. Can you bring them please?”

Emily nodded, but did not move, a look of confusion on her face.



“It's okay,” Father Juan said. “He's not a danger anymore.”

Emily looked from the priest to the sobbing man who just moments ago had been a terrible threat. Then she nodded one more time and took off running for Father Juan's apartment. She came back shortly with the bible and holy water, panting from the exertion. The gun was no where to be seen.

“Thanks,” he said. “We may be here a bit, if you wanna go.”

Lisa was standing some distance away, arms wrapped around herself, concern plain on her face.

“Are you sure you'll be okay,” Emily asked?

Father Juan nodded.

“Maybe I should take Lisa home then,” Emily continued. The look on her face made it clear she wasn't sure if it was a good idea. Then her look changed to that of concern. “What about the dishes?”

Father Juan was still slowly rocking the sobbing man. Without changing rhythm he somehow managed to slightly shrug his shoulders. “They can wait,” he said.

“I'll drop Lisa off and then be back in a bit,” she said. “Is that okay?”

Again he shrugged.

A short time later Father Juan heard her old truck start up and take off down the street. Father Juan said a silent prayer that she and Lisa had been spared any harm and then turned all his attention back to the man.

Sometime later, a very shaken criminal got off the ground and dusted himself off. Father Juan's knees had grown stiff from kneeling with the man, making it difficult for him to stand. The man reached down and easily lifted the priest to his feet, as if he were a child.

The man was still the same large size but his countenance had changed. Instead of fierce anger, he looked calm, relaxed. His eyes rimmed from crying but they still glowed with an inner calm.

“I don't know quite what to say, Father.”

The priest smiled at him and touched his shoulder. “It doesn't matter what you say, son. It matters what you do. I'll leave you with the words of Jesus, ‘go

now, and sin no more.’”

The priest gave the man one last hug and watched him get into his car. The man closed the door, started the engine and backed down driveway. He steered the car onto the street and slowly accelerated away.

Father Juan let out a large sigh and turned around, only to find Emily and Mali standing there behind him.

“Oh,” he said startled. “How long have you two been standing there?”

Mali shrugged.

“Just a few minutes,” Emily said. “I came out to check on you after cleaning up the kitchen but you looked like you were still busy, so I waited. *We* waited.”

“Thank you,” Father Juan said to them both.

He looked at his watch. It was 11:30. The night air was cool and quiet, except the constant drone of the crickets. Off in the distance they both heard a car’s tires squeal. It was the man with the gun, Father Juan was sure of it. They could hear the engine whine as the man pushed the gas pedal to the floor, getting a small chirp as he shifted into second and then third gear. The engine was still revving when they heard the collision. It was a loud smashing sound with the groan of tearing metal and the popcorn tinkle of broken glass.

The silence afterwards was deafening.

Emily and Father Juan locked eyes. She reached into her purse for her phone. “I better call an ambulance,” she said.

Mali suddenly pointed at Father Juan’s arm. “Look at that,” he said. “Your arm, it’s bleeding again.”

Father Juan looked down. His stigmata was welling up. Blood was trickling down his arm.

“Never mind about the ambulance,” he told Emily as she held the phone to her ear. “Better tell them to send a coroner instead.”

Emily pulled the phone away from her ear and covered the bottom part with her hand. “He’s dead,” she said, surprise evident in her voice?”

“Yes,” Father Juan said with finality. “I’m afraid very much so.”

Emily looked at him for a moment with disquiet then put the phone back to her ear and continued talking to the 911 operator.

Mali asked, “Who was that guy?”

Father Juan turned towards Mali and they both walked a little ways away from

Emily. “Just a man,” the priest said. “Like any other, sometimes good, sometimes bad.”

“But what did he want? What was he doing here?”

“Oh, that,” said Father Juan, finally making eye contact with Mali. He found it an effort to have a normal conversation. “He thought he came here to kill me.”

“He thought?” Mali asked. “If he *thought* he came here to kill you, what did he really come here for?”

“To die, Mali,” said the priest with no tone or inflection. “To die.”

Emily hung up the phone, and walked over to the men. “It’s late,” she said to Mali. “Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

“Mom was still worried, so I came out to make sure everything was okay.”

“Your mom was worried,” Emily asked, “Or you were curious? Which is it?” She reached up and put her hand on his shoulder to let him know she was teasing.

Mali laughed at being found out so easily. “Okay,” he said. “I admit, I was curious. But mom really was worried too.”

“Well tell her,” Father Juan said, “that everything is okay, that we’re all safe.”

I guess that means it’s time for me to go,” said Mali.

“Yes,” Emily and Father Juan said in unison.

“Okay, okay. I get the hint,” Mali said. He said good night and started walking towards his house. When he was almost there Emily yelled to him. “Mali,” she said. “I almost forgot. Lisa told me she thinks Father Juan is right.”

“He is?” asked Mali in confusion, “right about what?”

“That you’re the best player in Nazareth,” Emily replied.

Mali’s face looked pleased while his cheeks turned red at the same time.”

“Um, thanks,” he mumbled. “I mean, tell her I said thanks.”

He turned quickly before Emily could reply and all but ran into the house.

After Mali had left, Emily asked, “Are we?”

“Huh.”

“Are we really safe?”

Father Juan stared out into the night and thought for a bit. “Yes,” he finally said, “about as safe as you ever are in this world.”

Emily turned to look at him. From the light on the barn he could see anger in her face, anger and something else. "You worry more about a man pointing a shotgun at us," she said, "then you do for our own safety. And then when you get a scratch on your arm, you suddenly decide a man is dead." She paused for a moment, her mouth working but with no sound coming out. "There's something going on here and I don't like the looks of it. We need to talk."

"Yes," he said. "We do. Do you want to come up now? I can put on a pot of coffee but one of us probably should be there when the ambulance arrives."

The anger in her eyes flared and then died down. "You're right," she said. "One of us should be there and one of us should get home and take care of Lisa. If I know her, she'll be sitting up worried sick until I get back."

"She'll be just sitting there? Somehow that doesn't sound like Lisa."

"Oh, she may be sitting there but she'll have the shotgun out, along with a big bag of reloads, a large flashlight and the phone nearby where she can reach easily."

Father Juan's eyebrows shot up. "Now *that* sounds more like the Lisa I know," he said.

"Well, I did raise her to take care of herself," Emily said in defense.

"That you did," Father Juan said with respect. "You did indeed."

"So tomorrow," he asked after a moment.

Emily sighed. "Yes," she said, "tomorrow."

Father Juan walked Emily to her car and then started down the road. He reached the wreckage a few minutes before the ambulance arrived. The remains of the man made it clear he had been killed on impact. Wrapping a car around a telephone pole at 70-80 miles per hour was usually fatal, especially if the driver was not wearing a seatbelt.

By the time Father Juan was done helping clean up the road and giving his statement to the police, it was almost 2:00 in the morning. Much too late to call anyone, he thought, and I am too tired to want to anyway.

When he got to his little apartment, he found the kitchen cleaned up and the dishes dry on the rack. He sloughed off his shorts and t-shirt and climbed into bed, too tired to even shower. His last thought was of the man with the gun. He prayed that God would watch over his soul and then still praying fell into an exhausted sleep.

## Chapter 33

(Friday, 1/21)

His alarm clock went off at 7:00 in the morning. Father Juan looked at it from the comfort of his bed with disgust, like it was the apple from the tree of knowledge, complete with the incriminating bite. Wiping his eyes, he got up and stumbled to the kitchen where he discovered Emily had set up his coffee machine the night before. All he needed was to flip the switch and wait. He sat down on one of the cheap dining room chairs, letting the cold vinyl on its back prod him into wakefulness. The whirl of the events from the night before kept circling around in his brain, like a flock of pigeons refusing to land into coherent thoughts, all except one, that Emily Hoffman was an exceptionally thoughtful woman.

He smiled as he poured his first cup of coffee and was still smiling when he returned from his morning run for his second cup.

The weather had changed the few hours he had slept. The warm evening from before had been replaced by cool gusty winds from the north. Father Juan held his coat around him tightly as he walked the few blocks to the parish. As he stepped into the back door the wind gushed around him like a miniature flood, disturbing papers in the back hall and moving the curtains. He walked past the dark kitchen, through the sanctuary and into the office. No one else was in yet, not an uncommon event. Father Juan was thankful as he often found solace in his work without the distractions of other people.

In no time at all, he was deep into his paperwork pile, letting coffee and habit carry him through while his mind dealt with bigger problems in the background.

At 10:06 a call came in on the church line. Father Juan let it ring several times until he recalled there was no one there to answer the phone but him. He extracted himself from his little office, walked over to Emily's desk and picked up the phone.

"Holy Family Parish," he said.

"This is Lieutenant Dellarosa with the Amarillo Police. Is Father Juan available?"

"Oh, hello Lieutenant," said the priest. "It's me."

“Hello, Father. Do you have a moment? There’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“I’ll bet there is,” said the priest. “Word sure travels fast in your department.”

“Fast, padre? I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean. What word?”

“Huh,” said the priest. “I assumed you called about last night but it appears you’re calling about something else.”

“I’m afraid that is correct, padre. Is there something about last night I should know?”

“Yes, but we can get to that. Why don’t you start with what you called about and then I’ll fill you in. ¿Qué?”

“Qué,” said the lieutenant, taking a moment to gather his thoughts. “Do you remember our conversation a few weeks back where you asked me to look into a trucking company owned by a certain Antonio Alvarez?”

“Sure,” said Father Juan feeling like it had been months ago. “Did you find anything?”

“Yes and no, padre, yes and no.” You see, I made my usual rounds, stopping in at a couple other departments asking questions. No one locally seemed to know much so I called a friend or two that moved up to the capital to see if there was anything on the state level. This was all done informally, mind you, since there are no grounds for an investigation. One of those, ‘did you ever hear of a guy...’, conversations that happen from time to time.”

“Yes Lieutenant, I understand.”

“Good. Well no one at the state level had heard the name so I asked them to fish around and tell me if they got a nibble.”

“Did they get a nibble?”

“More like a strike. Yesterday afternoon I got three different phone calls, all in an hour. One from the Governor's Office, one from the Texas Attorney General's Office, and one from the U.S. Attorney General's Office.”

“Wow. That’s impressive.”

“You’re telling me. Unfortunately, they also called my boss as well.”

“Uh-oh,” said the priest. “That doesn’t sound so good.”

“You don’t know the half of it. I got chewed out four different ways from Sunday, let me tell you. I’ve never had my job threatened so many times before and with such colorful language. It was, shall we say, not a very delightful

afternoon.”

“Well, I’m truly sorry to hear that, Lieutenant. I never meant for you to get into trouble, especially over something so meaningless.”

“Forget about it, padre, it's not your fault and it is *not* meaningless.”

“But I asked you to look into something and it got you into trouble. Of course it’s my fault.”

“De nada, padre. It's nothing. Really, besides, I haven’t had a case this juicy come across my desk in years.”

“Juicy?” said the priest somewhat confused. “Why does that sound like you’re about to do something you were told specifically not to do.”

“Hah,” said the lieutenant. “Is it that obvious? Forget that. Listen, there're a few rules in police investigation which are important. One of them is, ‘always investigate the ones the big boys tell you not to.’ Well this one has ‘criminal’ written all over it. Why else would they go to so much trouble? I’m just a lowly lieutenant. If a lowly lieutenant has got the fat cats in Washington scared, then that means there is something to be scared about. No, this case is a stinker and I intend to dig until we find the crap.”

“Well, okay, Lieutenant. I trust your judgment. Just remember you have a wife and kids to look after as well. I would hate to think that any harm might come to them because of your work.”

“You know that is exactly what my Delores said to me this morning before I came into work.”

“Sounds like you married a smart woman,” said the priest.

“You ain’t kidding, padre. Except for her taste in men, she is practically perfect.”

“Bueno, bueno,” said the priest. “So what are you going to do, Lieutenant?”

“Investigate it. What else? Which reminds me, what happened last night that you thought I was calling about or is that it?”

“Oh no,” said the priest. “This is something definitely different. Someone, a man, came by to pay me a visit last night while I was entertaining some friends.”

“I take it this wasn’t a friendly visit?”

“No, it wasn’t. He came carrying a loaded shotgun and told me he had a speech to give before he pulled the trigger.”

“What the . . .! Are you telling me he was sent to kill you?”

“Si,” said the priest. “He was most definitely a hit man.”

“Someone sent a contract on a priest!” said the lieutenant. “Mary Joseph, mother of God, what is the world coming to?”

“Less cursing, I would hope,” said Father Juan calmly.

“I’m sorry padre but that is so hard for me to believe. I mean... so tell me about it. What happened, padre? How come you’re still alive? No offense but you hardly seem the type to stop a man who is used to killing others for a living.”

“What happened? You’re kidding me, right? You’ve read my file. What happened is always what happens whenever I come across a person who has committed a cardinal sin.”

“You mean it happened again?”

“Yes, Lieutenant, it happened again. He confessed his sins and then left. Three minutes later he wrapped his car around a telephone pole at 80 miles per hour. There were no survivors.”

The lieutenant let out a low whistle. “Wow,” he said. Then he started to giggle. The giggle increased into a chuckle and then to a laugh. Pretty soon the lieutenant was given over to a full deep seated belly-laugh.

“I’m sorry, padre,” he managed to say when he could finally catch his breath. “I don’t mean to be rude but that is the funniest thing I have heard in a long time. They set a contract out on the only man in the world who is un-killable. That’s too much.”

Father Juan found himself chuckling along as well. “I never thought of it that way but I guess it is funny. Too bad my friend at the time didn’t think so.”

“Your friend?”

“Yes, the secretary from our parish was over, she and her daughter.”

“I’ll bet she was pretty shaken up,” said the lieutenant with sympathy.

“Hardly,” said the priest. “The guy barely had his gun out when she showed up with a 45 and a bad attitude.”

“Dang! Smart girl.”

“Too smart. She could have gotten hurt. You should have seen the look on her face when I told her to put her gun down before she hurt the guy.”

“You told her what?”



“To put her gun down before she hurt the guy.”

“Let me get this straight. A guy approaches you with a shotgun and you’re concerned *he* might get hurt? I may be out of line here, Padre, but I think you have an issue with your priorities.”

“Look, Lieutenant. I know this may not make sense but I live in a different world than you. For most people their belief in God, belief in God’s redemption, is a faith; a thing they may believe in but it is something they never actually see, never feel, something that is not concrete. For me, it is *not* a faith. It is an absolute fact, a certainty. It’s as real to me as the rising of the sun, as real as gravity, maybe more real.”

“I knew what was going to happen because it is what has always happened. Four hundred eighty-eight times and counting. As soon as that man opened his mouth, he was dead and in the grave just as if I had shot him myself. There was nothing anyone could do. Trying to stop him would only lead to his death without a confession. Much as it pains me, I will not see a man die without a chance of redemption, no matter how undeserving he may be. This is my calling, my ministry if you like. It’s not much but it is what God has given me and I will not ignore the responsibility inherent in my gift just because it is inconvenient or dangerous.”

The lieutenant paused for a moment. “You’re right padre. I don’t see the world the way you do. Maybe I should. But this just makes me wonder, if you pardon the change of topic, why someone would send a hit man after a priest. So why would someone want to kill you? What do you know worth killing for?”

“That’s what I’ve been thinking about all night,” said Father Juan, “and I haven’t got a clue.”

“Do you think it might be related to Alvarez,” asked the lieutenant?

“I don’t see how, I mean that doesn’t make sense. I’ve met the man and he doesn’t seem like the type.”

“Sometimes it’s the guy you least expect,” said the cop. “Who else would fit? Sometimes you have to look only at the facts.”

“Hmm, I don’t know,” said the Priest. “It doesn’t make sense but the timing does seem about right. We first talked about the Alvarez thing and the town’s water shortage on a Monday, wasn’t it?”

Father Juan could hear papers being shuffled about in the background.

“Let me see,” said the lieutenant. “Yep looks like Monday, the third, two, almost three weeks back.”

“Hmm,” said Father Juan. “And you talked to your friends when?”

“That same afternoon, Monday, I remember, because we had another case that broke and I had some free time. I figured it was better to catch my friends in Austin on an afternoon then to try them on the following morning.

“That makes it slightly less than three weeks. Do you think that’s enough time to hire someone?”

“More than enough, if you know where to look,” said the lieutenant. “Not enough if you are new to this and want to be discrete.”

“New to this?” said Father Juan. “I don’t understand?”

“It’s simple,” said the lieutenant. “Most hit men are amateurs or the people that hire them are amateurs. Either way, they usually take way too much time trying to talk themselves into the crime. We’re talking weeks to months, sometimes years, until they finally get up the nerve to commit the crime. They’ll get together and meet for hours going over everything in excruciating detail.”

“They do,” Father Juan asked? “I had no idea.”

“Sure. That’s usually how we catch them. All those meetings, all that time out of their schedule – it’s usually pretty easy to find once you know where to look. The ones that are difficult are the real pros. They know how to keep their meetings short and to the point, just like they know how to follow through with actually killing a man.”

“So three weeks is good...bad?”

“Three weeks means we’re either dealing with an amateur where they’ll leave all kinds of evidence around and will be easy to catch or three weeks means they’re the real deal. In that case we won’t be able to find a thing.”

“That’s not much help,” said the priest.

“Actually it is,” said the lieutenant. “Knowing what to look for is the surest way to nab a bad guy, unless we use someone like you. Did you ever think about being a cop, Father Juan? I know some places I’d love to send you. You could just walk along and we would follow with a tape recorder and a coroner.”

“You have a very dark sense of humor, Lieutenant.”

“I live in a very dark world, padre.”

“I know exactly what you mean, Marco. I live there to.”

“Yes,” said the lieutenant. “What did you say this perp’s name was?”

“Dale Young,” said the priest. “At least that’s what the driver’s license said.

It's all on the sheriff's report you know. I specifically asked them to send you a copy."

"You did? Well that might help. Did you tell them why this Dale Young was at your house?"

"Are you kidding, and get thrown into jail again? No thank you. As it happened, I was near the scene of the accident and was able to walk there from my home before the Sheriff arrived."

"So they don't know about this man's reason for being in Nazareth?"

"To my knowledge, no, all they know is that he was in a single car accident." Father Juan waited a moment, then spoke again, "and Lieutenant."

"Yes padre."

"I would like to keep it that way."

"Well," said the lieutenant. "That makes things a bit tougher. It's hard to investigate someone if they didn't 'officially' commit a crime you know."

"I understand, Lieutenant. Just like I understand the information I gave you is from a confession. Need I remind you..."

"I get your point, padre. We're doing this on faith."

"An excellent way to put it, Marco, I knew I could trust you."

"Excuse me for saying it, father but damn it if you're right."

"Well as long as we're talking, I was wondering if you would do me another favor?"

"Another," said the lieutenant? He let out a sigh. "Why not? Shoot."

"Can you contact the C.O. of Fort Bliss, the Army base down in El Paso? Dale told me he spent a lot of time there, earned his way to every rank of Sergeant the Army has or so he said. No doubt there're a lot of folks who'll remember there. He should be buried with his own don't you think? Why he left that place we'll never know, but I suspect it was the only family that man ever had."

Lieutenant Marco Dellarosa was quiet for a moment. Father Juan could sense he was thinking. Finally through the static over the line he heard the lieutenant very quietly say, "I would be happy to do that, padre, very happy."

Father Juan thought he heard a catch in the lieutenant's voice. "Marco?" he asked.

"It's okay padre," said the lieutenant. "I just was thinking how nice it was that somebody cared for this son of a bitch. Maybe if someone had done it sooner,

then our Sergeant friend would never have drifted away from El Paso.”

“There just never is enough grace is there Lieutenant.”

“No, I suppose not, padre. I suppose not.”

## Chapter 34

Father Juan set the phone down in its cradle and let out a sigh. He got up quietly and walked into the sanctuary and from there to the side-altar. Grabbing a match, he lit a candle in front of the Madonna and knelt before her in prayer. He still had signs of tears in his eyes when Emily approached him.

“Father?”

Father Juan looked up slowly as if from a nap. “Yes daughter?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt but I thought you might like some lunch.”

“Lunch?” said the priest. “What time is it?”

“Three,” Emily replied. “A little after.”

“Three?” He looked around the church. The angle of the light on the walls told him of the sun’s passage. “What time did you come in?”

“A little after ten, you were already here, so I didn’t want to disturb you but after a while I thought...”

Emily was seated on the end of a pew, the closest one to the side-altar where the Madonna lay. Father Juan noticed she had a picnic basket sitting next to her on the pew.

“Have you eaten lunch yet,” he asked?

“No,” she replied. “I was going to and then...”

Father Juan looked her in the eyes and interrupted. “Thank you for getting me Emily. As it turns out I *am* famished, long moments of prayer always does that to me for some reason. Would you like to join me for lunch?”

She smiled at him and Father Juan suddenly noticed her eyes – how fragile she looked, as if her smile might crumble at any moment. He was not the only one who had been crying.

“I see you’ve brought a basket,” he said. “Is there any chance you might have some of Señora Espinoza’s tortillas in there?”

“There’s a chance,” she said, and her eyes lit up. Then she stood up, her face turning serious, like a little girl about to whisper a secret. “Common. I’ve got a place I’d... I’d like to show you.” She held out her hand and Father Juan took it, glad for the support as his knees were a little unsteady.

Walking with a slight limp from his stiff legs, Father Juan followed Emily out the back of the church and into the graveyard behind. She led him easily, twisting and turning among the grave stones, as if she had taken this path many times before. The trees over the grounds were mature and stately, reaching high into the dull gray sky and providing large pools of dark shade. Father Juan thought about how beautiful and peaceful the grounds were. Even the impending storm seemed more distant and removed, the trees doing an excellent job of blunting the harsh edge of the wind. They came upon a clearing, an open spot made between several large markers and Father Juan noticed all the stones held the same last name: Hoffman.

Emily wordlessly took out a blanket and settled down upon it, patting a place by her side.

Father Juan indicated with his head the stones all around them. “Family?”

“Yes,” she said. “I like to come here every once and a while, sort of a family reunion.” She reached out and patted one of the stones, a large one. “This here is my grandfather and grandmother.” She then pointed to the larger stone opposite. “And *that* is their parents. Mom and dad are over here, Aunt Joan and Uncle Fred are over there and this area,” she indicated roughly where they were seated, “is for me. It was supposed to be for me and Bill but that.... well, that didn’t work out.” Emily looked thoughtful for a moment then looked up again. Waiving her hand towards the markers further out she said, “the rest are all cousins, second cousins, great aunts, not so great aunts and a whole lot of what my father used to call ‘shirt-tail relatives;’ those that married into the Hoffman clan.”

“It’s a nice place,” Father Juan said. “Peaceful.”

Emily looked back at him, still thoughtful. “That’s what I think. I used to sneak boys out here to kiss them, up until I met Bill. He always thought it was creepy, all these dead people about.”

“Then he was twice the fool, if you ask me,” Father Juan said. “You got roots digging into this ground, deeper than these trees. You got a place to grow and a place to end; family to be around when it all comes down. What man wouldn’t

want that?”

Emily gazed at him with the same thoughtful look. Then she pulled over the basket and started setting out the contents, tamales, cooked corn (still on the cob, the green husks burnt at the edges), pickles, potato salad, fried chicken and a stack of tortillas straight from Señora Espinoza.

“Yumm!” he said. “That looks delicious.”

Emily smiled, as she passed him a plate and laid out some utensils. “Help yourself,” she said.

Before long they each had a plate full of food in their laps with various dishes spread out, some holding down napkins and other paper plates to keep the wind from sending them flying. They ate in silence. A little bit of sun came out and warmed up the ground. Any other day, wind and the storm would have made it too cold but the sun’s glow made it cozy. Father Juan cleaned his plate, surprised at his hunger, then grabbed a stray pickle and leaned back against one of the cool stones. Hoffman, it read, Elisabeth Ray and Heinrich Joseph. Almost 100 years ago they were each a living person, full of stories and hopes. Now they were just a name on a stone, soon even less than that.

“I’ve been thinking a lot,” Emily started without preamble, “about you, how you got here.” He started to speak but she waved him off, napkin still in her hand. “I’ve seen you work with others. You’re a good priest. You are kind, compassionate and you genuinely care. So how come you are here? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I mean I love this town,” she continued, “and I love the church but I’m not blind to the fact that this is a small town out in the middle of no where and the parish is not exactly one with a lot of growth potential, let alone one that needs the services of another priest. I’ve seen quite a few junior priests come through these parts, often priests with one kind of problem or another. You don’t have to say it but I know the church sometimes moves priests to places where they can have a second chance, a last chance to go before they get kicked out – sort of a parish of last resort; that, or a place where they can do the least amount of damage. I know this just like I know that airplane engines aren’t the only thing Father Jacob is good at fixing.”

She paused for a moment, taking a sip of water.

“So what I don’t understand is why you are here. You’re good with people, you don’t have a drinking problem, you don’t take from the offering tray and near as I can tell you don’t diddle little boys. By all accounts you should be running your own parish, maybe even wearing a bishop’s collar. Instead you are

out here, practically the definition of the middle of no where. So what's a priest like you doing in a place like this? If it wasn't for that man last night, I would say you must have angered the wrong bishop or had very poor political luck but now I'm not so sure. Something about last night was out of place. Strange, like I suddenly saw a part of you I've never seen before. It wasn't necessarily bad but at the same time it didn't make any sense."

She paused and took another sip. She looked back up at him, her eyes intense, peering. "So what are you hiding Father Juan," she said, "and why?"

Father Juan looked back into her stare calmly, relaxed. He had been in this place before, many times, too many. "The truth," he asked?

"Yes, the truth."

"Well good enough. I'll be happy to tell you the truth," he said, "I just don't know if you'll be happy to hear it."

She sat with her back to a memorial stone and said nothing, arms crossed, face blank, only raising one eyebrow to show she had heard.

"There's nothing really to hide," he said, "Lets see. You speak Spanish and I'm sure you heard the whispers and rumors in the parish. Ever heard the term 'Angel de la Muerte'?"

Emily thought for a moment. "Angel of death," she translated.

"Good," replied the priest. "What about, 'La Bendición Final'?"

"The final blessing?" she said, sounding more confused. But what's this..."

Father Juan held up his hand. "One more," he said. "What about Santa Muerte?"

"Oh, I know that one," she said as her face grew animated. "That's Saint Death. There's a shrine to her out in the back of the cemetery."

"Good," said Father Juan. "What do you know about Santa Muerte?"

"Well... she is supposed to bring good luck and money to the poor. Love as well I think, as I've only seen her in a wedding dress. Some say she is the most powerful of all the saints which strikes me as a little crazy but that's what they say. I know when we tried to move her shrine closer to the church, the gardeners threw a fit. She's supposed to be jealous of the other saints and does not like to be close to them, even to the Madonna."

"Good," said Father Juan. "What else do you know?"

"Hmm, I think she is really concerned about justice. Unlike the other saints,

they say the purity of the petitioner's heart is as important as the prayer itself. I've even heard that she'll actually punish those who pray to her for their own selfish needs."

Emily stopped speaking and looked into Father Juan's eyes. "I also know she is not officially a part of the church and she is frowned upon by most priests which makes this conversation a bit bizarre," she said with a smile. "Most priests seem to associate her with criminals and crime, like Jesús Malverde."

"That would be because she is often worshiped by the poor and the uneducated, a group of people who are usually the most vulnerable to the lure of crime," said the priest. "As well as most often being the victims of crime," he continued, "a sad irony which is lost upon most people, priests included. When times are bad, it is the poor who face a disproportional slice of the misery. It is no accident they will seek someone, or something who will bring them the justice they see but do not receive. Santa Muerte, the skinny bride of death, offers them that justice. Even the rich cannot escape her grasp, no matter how wealthy they are. Every man and woman, rich or poor, must face death and all her powers. She is, as they say, the great equalizer. The poor know this down to their bones and cling to Santa Muerte because of it."

"It sounds like you know quite a bit about her," said Emily.

"Yes, well you could say we've been acquainted," replied the priest dryly. "In fact there's a shrine to her just outside my apartment. Always has been."

"Is that what that was," Emily said? "I noticed the candles and the figure last night, but I was too busy scrambling to get my gun to pay it much attention and too angry afterwards."

"I'm sorry about that," Father Juan replied. "I tried..."

"Wait a minute," Emily interrupted. "You said, 'always has been'. Do you mean there has always been a shrine to Santa Muerte near where you live now or that everywhere you go there has always been a shrine because I don't remember a shrine being near that barn before."

"Everywhere I go," said the priest.

"Everywhere? For how long?"

"Since I was 16, more or less."



## Chapter 35

“So your family is really into Santa Muerte,” Emily asked?

“Well they were,” said the priest.

“They *were*?”

“Yes. They’re dead now.”

“They’re dead? I’m sorry to hear that. When did that happen?”

“About the time I turned 16,” the priest continued.

“Oh,” Emily replied. After a moment she asked, “Your family. All of them?”

“All,” he said.

Together they sat in silence and enjoyed the peace of the cemetery. Finally Emily asked, “So why the shrines then?”

“You’ve seen Santa Muerte. You know that she is always dressed as a bride in a wedding gown but did you ever wonder who she was going to marry?”

Emily looked thoughtful for a second. “Can’t say that I have, have you?”

Father Juan took a sip of water. “Many times. Many times.”

“Well, what did you conclude?”

“Conclude,” said the priest?

She tossed her wadded up napkin at him, bouncing it off his chin. “Yes you silly man. Conclude. With whom did you conclude is Santa Muerte supposed to marry?”

“Oh. Well near as I can tell she is to marry Padre Muerte. He is also known as Ángel de la Muerte, el Padre Delgada, El Confesor Última and sometimes even La Bendición Final.”

“Who is this father death, this final blessing, this skinny priest,” she asked?

“Me.”

“You? You are father death,” Emily asked unbelieving. “How? What?”

Father Juan paused for a second, taking another sip of water. “You see,” he said, “every time I am around someone who has committed a mortal sin, they are compelled into penance; to confess to me. They cannot help it and neither can I. But there is much more than that. After they have confessed, they will never be able to sin again.”

“What do you mean they will never be able to sin again,” she asked?

“What I mean is, before they can sin again, they die.”

“They die? They’re not killed, they die?”

“Yes, they die,” said the priest. “Killed? I don’t know. It’s hard for me to believe that it is God who kills them, who is responsible. Just the same, the end is always the same. Always!”

“But,” she said. “That’s impossible.”

“I know,” Father Juan said. “It *is* impossible. Still, it happens.”

Emily paused for moment and looked thoughtful. “So explains Padre Muerte, Father Death, but what about that guy who came over last night...?”

“Him? He was dead before he ever said a word,” Father Juan finished for her.

“He was?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

“Look, Emily. This has happened to me a lot.”

“A lot?” She raised an eyebrow. “How many is a lot?”

“Four hundred and eighty-eight times.”

“Four hundred and...” Emily trailed off in disbelief.

“Yes, four hundred and eighty-eight times,” the priest continued. “I’ve seen it happen so many times that I can tell when it is going to happen. I can see it on a person’s face. They get this certain look. It’s hard to describe but I can tell they want – maybe they need – they need to confess. That’s why I always carry some holy water with me. I’ve learned to perform the last rites as soon as they are finished confessing. It’s about the only thing I can do.

“Well,” Emily said, “that at least makes some sense. If they are going to die you might as well get them as ready to face God as you can.”

“Exactly,” Father Juan said with excitement. “Somehow I knew you would understand. It may sound funny but I’ve learned to see this as a ministry, a way of reaching those in the criminal world, not right away, mind you. At first I was angry that God would do this to me, angry and scared. After a while I realized that even murderers, rapists, killers, they deserve God’s love too.”

“Okay,” Emily said. “That makes perfect sense and yet is the weirdest thing I have ever heard.”

“Oh, I agree,” said the priest. “I agree.”

“So is that why you are here?” she asked.

“Partially. The problem with being around so many people when they die is that the police start to get suspicious.”

“Hmm,” she said. “I can see that. Does that mean you’ve been arrested?”

Father Juan stared into her eyes, “Forty-two times,” he said, “so far.”

“So far? You expect to be arrested again?”

“Yes. It’s only a matter of time.”

“It is? Why?”

“Look, as you said, I’m a stranger. A new priest in a backwater town. Just for that, there is bound to be some suspicion. It’s only natural and to be honest the church has earned that. Then you have someone die right next to this strange priest. The police show up and start asking questions, only the priest isn’t all that helpful. The cops want to know what happened and the truth is pretty darnn suspicious. Then when they try to ask more questions the priest tells them he knows the answers but cannot tell them.”

“The Seal of Confession?”

“Exactly. What a sinner confesses to me falls under the seal. I can no more speak of it than I can stop being a priest.”

“So when you don’t tell them everything, they think you are hiding something?”

“Yes.”

“I’m surprised you’re not more angry. I would be if someone accused me of something I didn’t do.”

“Oh, I guess I would be angry if I thought it would help,” said the priest. “It may be a real pain but I try to also remember the cops are only doing their job.”

“Yes,” Emily said. “I suppose so...” She stared off into space for a moment and then suddenly asked, “Your meeting with the cop?”

“The cop?”

“You know, the one in Amarillo, the lieutenant. A few months back.”

“Dellarosa, Lieutenant Dellarosa of the Amarillo PD,” said the priest.

“Yes, him! Is that why you met with him? To tell him about this?” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “I’ve learned over the years that if you tell the cops up front,

they're a lot easier to deal with. They won't believe you, at least not at first. I try to keep a copy of my full file with me. It's easier for a cop to believe a report rather than a person."

"So this Lieutenant, Dellarosa. He knows?"

"Yes."

"Everything?"

"I spoke to him about last night, if that's what you mean."

"Good," she said. "Yes."

Father Juan laughed, remembering the conversation. "You should have heard him when I told him about the hit man."

"He laughed," she asked, surprise in her tone?

"Well it is kind of funny when you think about it," Father Juan said defensively. "They sent a sinner to kill a man whose gift is to take the confessions of sinners just before they die."

She looked at him but showed no expression.

"He seemed to think it was pretty funny. Apparently I'm the only man in the world who cannot be killed by a hit man."

Emily still stared at him unmoved. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm just not finding dead people very funny today."

"Yes, well... I can see that," Father Juan said. "You should have heard him when I told him you pulled your pistol."

"He thought I was out of line," she asked?

"Quite the opposite, in fact he thought you were very smart. Me, on the other hand - he thought I was an idiot."

"Well," she said suddenly brightening, "on that we agree." Then a fierce look came over her face. "Look," she said. "You have no right to put me or my daughter in danger, no matter what, do you understand?"

"Perfectly. May I point out that at no time did I put you under any danger, someone else did? And can I also point out that I knew there wasn't any danger to you at the time, only I didn't have the time to tell you?"

"What do you mean, there wasn't any danger? The guy had a sawed-off shotgun and was a trained killer." Emily's eyes flashed in anger. "That's not dangerous?" Her tone was sharp, like steel.

“I know it’s hard to understand,” said the priest taking a breath, “but try to look at it from my point of view. As soon as Dale...”

“Dale?”

“Yes, his name was Dale. As soon as Dale stepped out of his car, I could see he was going to confess. He had no choice. All I had to do... all we had to do was sit there and let it happen. Only you didn’t know that and I didn’t exactly have the time to tell you.”

She looked at him, disbelief still plain in her eyes.

He stood up, angry, pensive. “It’s not exactly as if I have any choice in the matter either, you know.” He started pacing back and forth while Emily sat impassively, arms crossed. “For over twenty years I’ve been dealing with this – this *gift*. It doesn’t matter where I go or what I do. I can be out buying groceries, out at a baseball game, walking in the park, anywhere, even in church. Suddenly it will happen and when it does, all I can do is listen to someone spew the worst kind of filth, to confess to me the most horrible of crimes of murder, rape and torture. I have to sit there and listen and somehow try to find the same compassion that Jesus must feel for them. Only I’m not Jesus. I’m just a man.

“I try to be careful, try to stay away from the public but there are some things you have to do around other people. Some places you have to go. And for me, everywhere I go, every day I wake up, I have to live knowing I could be watching a man die at any moment.”

He trailed off then stopped pacing, hands clenched in fists. Opening and closing, opening and closing, barely able to see from the tears in his eyes. Looking down he saw Emily had her fist covering her mouth like she was biting her knuckle. Tears streamed from her eyes, running down her face.

“You wanna know what the worst part is,” he asked as if his words were lashing her? “When it happens, when the word gets out at each new parish what kind of man I am, do you know what they do? They get frightened. They get scared. No one wants to see me for penance because they’re afraid they’ll die. No one! Pretty soon they get scared just to have me around, like I have aids or something. They won’t even touch me or talk to me and then the church will do what it always does with priests it cannot deal with; they pass me on to the next parish, only to start the whole process all over again.”

“Do you know how many parishes I’ve been to,” he said like it was a challenge? “Do you have any idea how many?”

She shook her head slightly, fist still over her mouth.

“Twenty-two,” he said. “Twenty-two. One for every year I’ve been a priest with an extra tossed in for fun. Besides my little gift, it’s the one constant in my life. No matter where I go, no matter how hard I try to be the best priest possible, the people will get scared and I will be moved on.”

Father Juan sat down on the blanket like a puppet whose strings have been cut, the picnic food long forgotten. He took a deep breath to release the racking sob that has been building up and then slowly relaxed.

“I know it’s not right to ask but just once, just once, I’d like God to give me my old life back. Just once, I’d like to live like everyone else. Just once.”

She reached out quietly and held his hand. Together they sat and cried, surrounded by Hoffmans.

## Chapter 36

*(Following Saturday, 1/22)*

The next day, a Saturday, Father Juan spent cleaning up his apartment. He had been going to so many Swiftettes' games, twice a week for almost two months, his free time at home was limited. The results were dust bunnies all over the carpet and a bathroom that required a gas mask and a stout heart just to enter. Besides, he really needed a distraction from his own thoughts. His brain was still trying to digest the last few days and at that moment he didn't know what to think.

Several hours later and still sweaty from his excursions, Father Juan slumped in his reading chair and sipped a cup of coffee. At least the bathroom and the floors were clean. He still had two loads of laundry and the kitchen to go but at least he was making headway.

When the phone rang, he slowly reached over and picked it up from its cradle, too tired to move any faster.

“Bob’s house of orphan fortune cookies,” he said by way of an answer.

Bubbly laughter filled his ear. “Oh Mijo,” said Patty Pérez. “You always crack me up.”

“Tia,” Father Juan cried suddenly full of energy. “¿Como esta?”

“Bien, bien. How are you?”

“Tired,” Father Juan said, as the question brought to mind all the events of the last few days. “Tired and happy. Did I tell you I met a girl?”

“What?”

“I met a girl.”

“Mijo, stop teasing your old aunt.”

“But its true.... Well, sort of,” the priest continued. “Actually I’ve known her since I moved here but I just now realized how cool she is.”

“Cool?”

“Yes cool. Smart, funny, handy with a gun, an excellent mother and girlfriend to a buddy of mine. What’s not to like?”

“Are you okay, Mijo? You don’t sound so good.”

“Yes Tia. I’m fine. It’s... It’s just been a heck of a week and I find my mood is all over the place.”

“That bad?”

“Worse.”

“Hey, how did your dinner go?”

“Dinner?”

“Remember? The one you called me for advice about. Did you make your mother’s molé or did you chicken out?”

“Oh,” Father Juan said, his memory suddenly making him smile, “*that* dinner. I made the molé, *and* the flan. It was a big hit. They even managed to eat your salsa without a sweat; you know the serious, burn-twice kind. After that we had to go out and play a pick-up game of basketball to work off all that food.”

“Basketball? With a girl, mijo? That sounds serious.”

“Two girls actually. I told you she brought her daughter, right? I got them both to play with my neighbor, Mali. You know, the one I told you was such a great player?”

“Well, that sounds like a lot of fun.”

“It was. Right up until the hit man showed up.”

“A what, mijo?”

“Hit man,” Father Juan said softly.

“Mijo!” She said loud enough to hurt his ears.

“Relax Tia. No one got hurt, none of us at least.”

“Santa Maria and all the saints preserve us,” she said in rapid Spanish. “What are you doing, Juanito? A hit man? That is not even funny!”

“I’m not joking, Tia,” Father Juan said softly. “Would to God that I was.”

Patty Pérez took a deep breath and then let it out. “I’m sorry mijo. It's just... you scared me. That’s all.”

“I know,” he said. “It scared me too.”

“Of course it did. Now tell your Tia what happened.”

Father Juan started with the dinner and told her the whole story, including the conversation with Lieutenant Dellarosa the next morning and his picnic lunch with Emily. When the story was over, his aunt sat quietly on the other end of the line in thought.

“So this Dale,” she asked after a long moment, “he didn’t say who sent him?”

“No, Tia, he didn’t.”

“And you don’t think it was Alvarez who sent him?”

“I don’t know,” said the priest. “I don’t know him well enough to know but it just doesn’t make sense. Besides, I’ve met the man.”

“You have,” she asked?

“Sure. At his daughter’s wedding. Remember when I told you they wanted me to do the ceremony and then later didn’t? That was his daughter.”

“Oh, I remember. His daughter was the one who wanted the same priest who christened her to marry her, right?”

“Yes, that’s him. We talked a couple of times that day about this and that. He seemed like a good father to me and he never once gave me *that* feeling, if you know what I mean.”

“Hmm,” his aunt said. “You’re right. That doesn’t make sense.”

“Pretty much,” said the priest. “But hey. You didn’t call me to hear my sad-sack story. Why’d you call? What’s up?”

“Oh, it’s probably nothing mijo. I had my physical last week and the doctor’s office called yesterday and asked me to come in. Of course they called on a Friday afternoon and didn’t have an opening until Monday. Why do they do that, mijo? Scare an old woman all weekend and not tell her why? I swear. Doctors!



They drive me crazy loco, sometimes.”

“Don’t they,” said the priest in sympathy. “They didn’t tell you anything, Tia?”

“Nada, not a thing!” She changed her voice to sound like a recording. “We had an irregularity on your test and want you to come in and retake it. Beep!”

“So you have to retake a test?”

“Si. Hopefully it’s not algebra. I hated algebra in high school. I’d hate to have to retake that.”

“Ha,” Father Juan chuckled. “If it's algebra, then call me on your cell phone and I’ll help you cheat.”

“Great,” she said, voice dripping with sarcasm. “All I need on my conscious, leading a priest into sin at my age.”

“There’s an age limit to sin,” said the priest? “That's new to me. I thought you could pretty much sin right up into your dotage.”

“Some sins you can, sweetie,” his aunt said with a sigh. “Some sins you can’t, no matter how hard you try. Believe me, I know.”

Father Juan laughed at her tone. When he was done he asked, “Seriously, Tia. Are you doing okay, taking your meds, feeling any symptoms?”

“Besides, wanting to kill my doctor? No. Lately, I’ve been getting light-headed after sitting for a while but that’s pretty normal or so I’m told.”

“Light-headed?” said the priest. “Hmm, that’s not so bad. Even I get light-headed these days. At least you’re not suffering from mood swings.”

“Mood swings, mijo? You?”

“Si, although I believe they are considered normal for someone who has recently had their life threatened by a professional killer. I just wish they would go away, especially when I’m around Emily. I hate feeling like a fool around her.”

“Hmm, mood swings. What else, mijo? Does your heart race, palms get sweaty?”

“Um sometimes,” said the priest.

“How about your diet? You been eating well?”

“Uh, not exactly,” confessed the priest. “I’ve been so busy that sometimes I forget.”

“You? Forget to eat? You are my mijo, right?”

“Yes, I know. It's a bit unusual but the parish has me pretty busy and I've also been going to every basketball game. That doesn't leave much spare time.”

“Let me guess,” said his aunt. “Do you sit next to her at the games?”

“Usually, why?”

“Oh, mijo!”

“What! What is it?”

“Dizziness, shortness of breath, mood swings?” Oh, mijo. Don't you see? You're in love.”

“What?” the priest shouted. “Tia! Quit goofing off like that.”

“I'm not goofing off, mijo,” she said quietly.

“Then you must be losing it,” the priest said, getting louder and louder. “I'm not in love! I am a priest!”

“Since when,” his aunt said softly, “was it okay for you to yell at me?”

Father Juan heard her tone and stopped. He took a deep breath and then let it out in a rush. “I'm sorry, Tia. I shouldn't have yelled at you. It's just, it's just that I've had such a crappy week and now you're telling me I'm in love like I was some member of your parish.”

“But you've always been a member of my parish,” she said.

“I know. It's just that I have always been faithful to my vows. What you are saying makes no sense.”

“No sense? Like a sending a hit man to kill a priest?”

“Exactly,” said the priest.

“Never the less, mijo,” she said. “You are in love.”

“Now who's talking crazy loco?” said the priest. “You gonna call me after your doctor appointment?”

“Don't I always?”

“No,” said the priest. “Sometimes, yes. Always? No!”

“Yes, I'll call you, mijo.”

“Good. I expect a full report. Until then, I have a kitchen to clean, a few loads of wash left and a game to watch.”

“Didn't you see the game yesterday?”

“No. I had Mali record it so I could watch the Swiftettes instead. Don't tell me

what happened. I want to watch it fresh.”

“Okay, mijo. All I’ll say is you’ll be in for a good time.”

“They handled the Nuggets that well,” he asked?

“You asked me not to tell,” she reminded him.

“Ugh. You’re right, Tia. See you later.”

“Good bye mijo. God bless.”

*(Wednesday, 1/26)*

After the events of the week before, the dull monotonous days that followed were like a salve to Father Juan’s soul. Never before had the slow pace of a Sunday Mass seemed more refreshing, the snail pace of the usual Monday paperwork more fulfilling. Father Jacob and Emily were content to go on as if nothing had happened and not really sure what to think, Father Juan was relieved at their attitude.

So it was a big surprise when he came home Wednesday evening to find Jade Alvarez and Lisa Kauffman playing basketball with Mali. He first spied them as he was walking down the road. The only illumination in the cool winter air was from the single large light on the barn. It immediately brought back all his memories from the last game he played there. Was it only last Thursday, he asked himself? He paused for a moment to collect his thoughts and watched the three play. By now he was used to how well the two girls, the self named evil twins, played together. They passed the ball like two sides of the same player and moved though most opponents like a fish slips though a stream. But even from the road, Father Juan could see that Mali had a talent for interfering; for judging where the girls would be next and getting in between them a split-second before hand. It was similar to something he had noticed the other night. Mali has this quality about his play that made all other players either play to him or play around him. Always he was somehow in the middle of every move.

Watching him play was breathtaking, like watching a great chef casually make a meal or hearing a sermon that radiated on the faces of everyone in the church.

By the time he reached the court, all thought of the previous night had fled.

“Need any help, Mali?” he called out as he walked up to the barn. The boy just smiled and shook his head, hands on his knees, too out of breath to talk, too happy to stop.

Jade and Lisa looked at each other, and simply stopped.

“I think that’s enough,” said Lisa walking over towards the barn wall where her sweat shirt and school books casually laid.

“You’re not kidding,” said Jade following behind her. “Five minutes I was sure you were right. It took another...” she glanced at her cell phone.

“Twenty-two minutes,” suggested Lisa, also holding up her phone to look at the time.

“Twenty-two minutes to confirm it,” continued Jade.

“Confirm what,” said Father Juan.

The girls glanced at each other again. Father Juan could almost hear them talking back and forth with their minds. The effect was startling, almost creepy.

“Him,” Jade said, pointing at Mali while she used her sweatshirt to wipe the sweat off her face and neck.

Mali looked stunned for a second, as if he had just been named as a murderer in a trial. “Uh, what?” he replied, in perfect teen-aged boy English.

“I told her about how well you played,” Lisa answered to Mali.

“Over and over,” Jade interrupted with an eye role.

“So much so that Jade, here, started getting annoyed.”

“Annoyed?” said Jade. “More like bored out of my mind.”

Lisa stuck her tongue out at Jade. Jade returned the move. It was obviously a practiced gesture.

“So finally,” Jade picked up.

“She agreed to come play here,” said Lisa.

“Purely to stop her from annoying me,” said Jade.

“Boring, you mean,” said Lisa.

“Boring,” said Jade.

“Ahem,” said Mali, trying to find a break in the conversation long enough to speak. “You think I’m boring?”

Both Lisa and Jade shot the boy a look that shut him up.

“Boys,” said Lisa.

“Boys,” echoed Jade.

“Anyway,” said Lisa turning back towards Father Juan.

“You’ve got to tell coach about him,” said Jade.

“Yes” said Lisa, “you do.”

“Coach?” said Father Juan.

“Yes coach,” said Lisa.

“You know,” said Jade, “coach Doyle, the boys' basketball coach.”

“Oh,” said Father Juan. “Now I understand. You want me to tell coach Doyle to recruit Mali for the Swifts.”

“Exactly,” said Lisa. “That boy,” she said pointing towards Mali, “would be the best player on the Swifts.”

“More like the best player in town,” added Jade.

“Yes,” nodded Lisa, “in town.”

“Even better than the evil twins,” Father Juan asked?

The two girls looked at each other again and then back at Father Juan.

“Boys,” said Lisa.

“Yah, boys,” said Jade.

Never before had Father Juan heard one word carry so much loathing. In spite of it, it made him laugh.

The two girls gathered their things and walked over to Mali, who was now recovered enough to be standing straight and not panting.

“Bye,” said Lisa, as she gave him a peck on one cheek.

“Thanks for the game,” said Jade as she gave him a peck on the other.

As the girls walked off, carrying their books, Mali stood there stunned while his face turned twenty shades of red.

“Wow,” said Father Juan. “I think they really like you.”

“Wow.” Mali’s mouth moved but no sound came out. “Wow.”

## Chapter 37

*(Thursday, 2/3)*

“Can I ask you something about the Swifts?”

The question was shot by coach Doyle into the middle of half-time, apropos of nothing. Father Juan and the coach were sitting in the coach’s small apartment watching the Los Angeles Lakers play the Sacramento Kings. A large aluminum tray, empty of everything but a little sauce and two forks, spoke of a frenzied consumption of enchiladas. The tray and several scattered beer bottles lay spread out on a small table in front of the couch. Four or five remotes were tossed about amid the wreckage of the food and a large, almost ominous television sat opposite of the men, looming over them all.

After talking with the girls on Wednesday night, Father Juan had looked at his Lakers schedule, noted that a game with the Kings was only a week away and then called coach Doyle to suggest making it an event. The coach had enthusiastically agreed and volunteered his living room, seeing that it had the superior sized television. All during the first half, the two men had leaned into a pretend rivalry, almost as much as they had the food. Now they were sitting on the couch feeling both fat and happy. It helped that the spread was only two points going into the half, so both men could claim their honor was intact.

“I think I need an outside opinion and I don’t know who else to ask,” continued the coach.

“Well,” said Father Juan cautiously, still feeling the beer in his head, “What exactly are you looking for?”

“That’s the thing,” said the coach. “I don’t know. The guys are pretty good this year and they seem to play well but there is something missing, some part, something vital that is keeping them from winning.”

“Hmm,” said Father Juan. “I thought they were doing pretty well this year. Aren’t they up by a couple of games? I know they’re playing Happy next Tuesday but other than them, who else is even close?”

“Oh, we did well in our league. It’s the teams outside our league that worry me. Withharral gave us a drubbing in December and McLean is looking especially good this year. They spanked Happy and you know how Happy handled us in January.”

The game against Happy had not gone well but Father Juan could not

remember much about it as it had happened on the day after someone had tried to kill him.

“Sure,” said Father Juan. “I see your concern. I’m just a little bit surprised. This is your second year here, right?” Coach Doyle nodded his head. “And this is your second winning season. In fact you’re doing quite a bit better than last year aren’t you? So while I see you would want to improve some, all good coaches do, I just don’t see why you are worried?”

“Oh, that,” said the coach. “Believe it or not, it's job security. The folks around here take their basketball seriously. Look at me, already sitting on two winning seasons and still the people in town call me *Mister Doyle*. They don’t say that to Donahue. No they call her coach. She also has two state championships under her belt.”

“Huh?” said Father Juan, surprise evident in his tone. “Do you really think they would kick you out after two very good seasons?”

“Count on it,” said the coach. “They’re already giving me pressure at the school saying I’m the only coach who doesn't teach a class there. That’s why my pay is so low because I wouldn’t teach their stupid math class as well.”

“They wanted you to teach math?”

“Yes,” said the coach. “Can you believe it? Donahue took the only good spots. She teaches English and some stupid Lit class which anyone could do. Now they want me to fill the only opening left.”

“I don’t understand,” said the priest. “Why don’t you do the class?”

Coach Doyle shot Father Juan a look. “Why do you think I started working for Alvarez,” he said, changing the subject. “Coaching pay is for shit anyways and I’ve got bills to pay.”

Father Juan thought about the new SUV out front and the nice television across from him but wisely decided not to say anything.

“At least Alvarez,” the coach continued, “knows how to treat a man, not like the rest of this hick town.”

Father Juan sat in silence, not sure if it was the alcohol doing the talking or the man.

“So,” said the coach. “That’s why I asked you over. I need a way to take the state this year or at the very least, the division. Taking the league is not enough.”

The coach got up and wandered into the kitchen. “You need another beer?”

he called from behind the opened fridge.

“No thanks,” said Father Juan. “I think two is my limit.”

“Cheep date, huh?” said the coach.

“Something like that,” replied Father Juan.

“You know, you really threw me for a loop when you showed up in just a t-shirt.”

“Ah,” said Father Juan. “You expected me to wear my dog collar to watch the game?”

“Something like that,” said the coach. “Sure.”

“Well, the thing is, the church kind of frowns on its priests jumping up and down and yelling like a fool while their team crushes their opponents. It's a real problem for the Cardinal in LA, the crushing part, that is.”

“Hardy, har, har,” said the coach, reclining back on the couch. He took a sip from his new beer and stared off into the ceiling. “Seriously, buddy,” he said after a moment. “Do you have any ideas that could help? I'm really stuck here.”

“Seriously?” asked the priest.

“Seriously.”

“Okay then. But keep in mind this is just the ravings of an amateur, right?”

“Right.”

“Good. Then I see two things. You need a better inside game and you need a power forward.”

“A better inside game?” the coach practically shouted. “Those guys are great in the key and they handle the lanes better than, well then, anyone. What are you talking about, inside game? Shush.”

“You asked my opinion,” said the priest softly. “Do you want to hear it or not?”

“I'm sorry,” said the coach after a moment. “I did ask.” He waived the hand holding his beer in a circle. “Please go on.”

“Okay,” said the priest. “You've got a team full of precision players. They are fast, they shoot well and they pass better than most pro teams but they don't have a muscle game inside the key.”

“What do you mean a muscle game?”

“That tall kid you've got. What's his name? Jenkins? He shoots what 16, 20 a



game?”

The coach waved his bottle in assent. “Something like that,” he said.

“So what’s his rebound rate?”

“Um, 4, 6. I don’t know off the top of my head.”

“Imagine if he picked up every dink, every spinner, even if it was only, say, every other shot or just the missed ones. What would that do for your offense? You got three kids that can break faster than a fart in a burrito factory. If he could get the ball to them what would that do for your score?”

“Wow,” said the coach eyes getting big. “You know I never thought of that. Jenkins is good but I never thought he could clean the glass well.”

“That’s the thing, he can’t,” said the priest. “He’s a great offensive player and he can move the ball well but when it comes down to playing with his elbows, he’s too shy. You need someone who can sit in the key and really guard it, someone who can clean the glass like no body’s business – someone who can get the ball out of the defensive center and out to the offensive edge.”

“Sure. And I also need to win the lottery,” said the coach. “Where am I going to find a player like that in this town?”

“That’s the funny thing. The perfect guy for you is my neighbor.”

“You’re neighbor,” said the coach? You’re in the back of ol’ what’s her name’s barn. Maltoola.”

“Malieitolula,” said the priest. “Mall ee toe lou la.”

“Mall... whatever,” continued the coach. “I don’t know that area well. Who is this neighbor?”

“My landlord’s son. Mali.”

“You mean the fat kid with the funny clothes?”

“That's the one.”

“Are you kidding me?” said the coach. “That kid is slower than snot. Why half my team could run circles around him.”

“Yes. That’s what I thought too until I played him. Believe it or not, that kid is fast. He can break, he’s got great hands, can shoot well inside and outside and he has at least a three foot vertical.”

“Mali?”

“Yes Mali. Not only that but he has an elbow game that you have to see to

believe. I've never seen anyone but Shaq dominate the key like he does."

The coach shook his head as if it would affect his hearing. "We're talking about the same kid right, the fat kid with the funny dress shirts?"

"That's the one, the fat, tall kid."

"He's tall? I never noticed that."

"That's because he slumps like a teen-ager whenever he sits. Get him to stand straight and you'll find he's taller than you. Heck he's almost as tall as me and he's not even 16 yet."

"I'm sorry but I still don't understand. You're telling me this fat kid can play?"

"No. What I'm telling you is that fat kid will probably go pro. He's that good. You know the two girls on the Swiftettes, the evil twins?"

"Lisa and Jade," the coach said with a smile. "Sure."

"Well I had them play with Mali the other night. Actually I had Lisa play with him and her mother and she got Jade to play against him the next week."

"Those girls are pretty good though. I imagine they hammered him really good."

"Then you imagined wrong," said the priest. "They told me themselves they think he is that good. Jade even said he was the best player in town, bar none."

"Jade thought someone in town was better than herself?" said the coach, his tone incredulous.

"Yep, hard to believe but she did. It shocked Lisa as much as me. In fact, the two of them begged... insisted that I tell you about him, Emily too."

"Emily?"

"Sure, she played against him as well. The same night Lisa did. That's how Lisa got Jade to play him."

"When was this?" asked the coach, his tone suddenly very flat.

"Uh, a week, two weeks ago from today. The girls came over on a bet. They thought I couldn't cook but I showed them. After dinner we went out to work off the flan. Since Mali was with us, we asked him to join in the fun."

Coach Doyle's eyes seem to glow and he grew very still. "You had dinner with my girlfriend?" he asked through clenched teeth.

Father Juan finally noticed the change in his friend. "Uh, if you put it that way, yes. I did have dinner with your girlfriend. *Your* girlfriend also happens to

be *my* friend and colleague. Knowing that in a small town such things might make for gossip, I also invited her daughter along as a chaperone. I can assure you...”

“Get out!” The yell came out like a bomb. “Get. Out!”

“What in the world are you yelling about,” said the priest?

“What are you doing alone with my girlfriend?” yelled the obviously angry coach.

“Look, you idiot. I’m a priest, and your friend,” Father Juan yelled back. “Even if you don’t believe the whole vow and celibacy thing, what makes you think I would ever steal anything from *a friend*? And what makes you think Emily would ever do anything so stupid as to hurt you?”

“Get. Out!”

Father Juan got off the couch, picked up his jacket and stumbled out the door, never once looking back. He was so angry that he forgot to close the door on his way out. Halfway down the block he heard it slam. Man, he thought to himself. What a jerk. Some guys cannot hold their liquor.

## Chapter 38

(Sunday, 2/6)

It was mid afternoon on Sunday before Father Juan got a break. That morning was both the regular mass and then a christening. The baby, Tiffany, was the daughter of Mark and Lisa Zimmer and granddaughter to Señora Espinoza. Little Tiffany had cooed the whole ceremony making Father Juan look like he knew what he was doing with kids. Because there were so many members from both Mark and Lisa’s families, Father Juan ended up doing the whole christening in both English and Spanish. He was worried that the bilingual ceremony would take twice as long and bore everyone to tears but judging by the smiles he saw, no one seemed to mind.

The biggest smile of all belonged to Father Jacob who sat unobtrusively at the back of the sanctuary and watched with a grin.

One moment that really stuck in Father Juan’s mind happened after the

ceremony. Ester Espinoza and Wendy Keim (who now liked to be called Señora Keim) were standing in the back hall and overseeing while the families were eating. At first Father Juan saw them exchanging recipes but then later he caught them arm in arm, giggling like school girls. For some reason this made his eyes tear up, so he stepped into the sanctuary and crossed to the church office to get a tissue. He had just come back into the sanctuary when he was approached by Father Jacob.

“Quite a turn out, huh?”

“Yes,” said Father Juan. “I was worried the christening would go too long, especially for all the regular parishioners.”

“Well they didn’t seem to mind, as near as I could tell,” said the senior priest. “They sure stayed through the whole ceremony.”

“And the baby, little Tiffany, was a real charmer. Easiest baby I ever held,” continued Father Juan.

“You think it was the baby,” asked Father Jacob? “I think it was the priest. You did a good job up there, father. The parishioners really appreciate your work. Already I can see them respecting you, trusting you.

“Did you know,” continued Father Jacob, “that the Zimmer’s called the church office and specifically asked for you to do the ceremony? Miss Hoffman will never fess up to it but I heard the conversation plain as day.”

“Really?” said Father Juan, not knowing what else to say.

“Really,” said the senior priest. “I just wanted to let you know I appreciate your efforts. How long have you been here anyway?”

Father Juan thought for a moment. “Hmm, four months, give or take.”

“Well, that’s pretty short for these folks. Usually they take years before they start liking somebody.”

“That long?” Father Juan asked.

“Sure. Took me darn near a year before Mrs. Keim would even speak to me but she treats you like a long lost son.” Father Jacob thought about his words for a second. “Okay, maybe not like a son, how about better than a son?”

Both priests chuckled at this. Father Juan had noticed that Mrs. Keim had warmed to him ever since the Gaudete mass where he had mixed in elements of the traditional Our Lady of Guadeloupe mass. He had been wise to ask her help in pulling off the last minute changes to the mass and had discovered in the process that she really did have a nice heart underneath her dour looks. Now

she was downright possessive of the growing group of Mexican Catholics attending the parish, almost like a mother duck protecting her chicks. She made a point of saying hello and learning the names of everyone who was new and worked hard to make them feel welcome.

“You know,” said Father Juan, “I wish I could take more credit for that but I have to admit that I never would have guessed Mrs. Keim would prove to be such an asset for the parish and, she is, much to my amazement. I guess that’s why God is ringleader of this circus and not me.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” said the senior priest. “Welcome to the big top.”

Both men chuckled again, as they closed up the parish for the afternoon.

*(Tuesday, 2/8)*

That Tuesday, Father Juan finished up his paperwork early. There was an away game that afternoon in Happy, Texas. It was about a 40 minute drive and Father Juan wanted to leave in plenty of time to get there. Emily had left right after lunch because she was driving the team van, a vehicle thoughtfully provided by Alvarez Trucking.

The Happy Cowboys were a very good team and one of the few that was a real threat to the Swifts and Swiftettes. Both teams were near the top of league play and needed a win to earn the one bye in the first playoff bracket. A win here would mean one less playoff game and a chance to face the playoffs next week more relaxed and fresh. It was also the last game in league play and against the one team that Nazareth thought of as a cross town rival.

So it was quite a surprise to Father Juan when Coach Doyle showed up in the parish office just when the priest was getting ready to leave. The two men had spoken briefly on Sunday. The coach had greeted Father Juan with a smile as if nothing had happened at his apartment on the previous Thursday which left the priest feeling perplexed. Now that he was here, the priest felt his stomach start to tighten.

“Yo, L.A.,” said the coach.

“Yo Sac,” said the priest. This was a common greeting between the friends.

Father Juan looked up from gathering his things. “What up?” he said trying to

keep a playful tone to his voice. "Don't you have a game to watch?"

"In a bit," the coach replied. "The Swiftettes are first this time. We play after."

"Oh," said Father Juan. "Did you need something? Father Jacob is looking over the pump at the Hoffman place."

"Yah, I know. Emily told me."

The day before, the Hoffman well had started to go dry. Right now it was sputtering on and off. Father Jacob had gone out to see if there was anything he could do. Emily didn't grow much on her family's place these days but planned on doing so some time in the future. To do that, she would need a well.

Father Juan glanced over at the map he had started over a month ago showing the wells that had gone dry. Each week he had drawn a new line to represent the growing zone of drought. So far, it had been 100% accurate. The one time a well went dry outside the circle proved to be a mechanical failure which Father Jacob quickly fixed. The Hoffman farm was right on the edge of the 8th weekly line he had drawn. He knew Emily had lived out there, at least intellectually but hadn't thought about the ramifications of her place on the slowly enlarging drought map until Paul mentioned her name. Now he felt guilty for not remembering.

Father Juan looked down and saw he had all his things. "Well if it's me you're looking for then what can I do for you coach?" he asked.

"Well now," said the coach. "That's a funny thing. You see, this morning at the warehouse, Sheriff Johnson came by."

"Really," said Father Juan. "What in the world was he after?"

"He didn't say. He just showed up at the door and asked if they could look around."

"At Alvarez's place?" Father Juan asked, surprise in his voice.

"Yep."

"Did he have a warrant," asked the priest?

"Funny, but that was the first thing Antonio asked when he showed up."

"Did he?" asked the priest.

"Nope. They said he would have one by Monday."

"Sounds about right, depending on how fast the judges work around here.

"You have experience with this," the coach asked?

“A little,” said the priest. “More than you’d believe and less than I deserve,” he said. He tried to make a joke of it but came out sounding flat. The coach stood there not responding.

“You're not in any trouble are you coach?”

“Me?” said Paul. “No. Nooooo! I can’t afford trouble. The payments are too high.”

“You ain’t kidding brother,” said the priest.

The coach stood there quietly staring at the wall, as if looking for the right words to say. Father Juan relaxed, knowing it may take him some time to get around to his point. Some men were like that.

“The thing is Sheriff Johnson and I got to talking. You see I called Antonio as soon as I saw the black and white in the driveway and entertained the sheriff until he could get there. Anyway, while we were waiting for Antonio to come up from the back warehouse...”

“Is that the one with the big number eight on the side?”

“That’s the one,” the coach replied giving the priest a sharp look. “Anyway, the Sheriff told me something funny. He asked how Emily was feeling after seeing the car wreck. I thought this strange and asked him what he meant. What car wreck?”

Father Juan could feel his gut coil tighter.

“You okay Father,” said the coach. “Your face is a bit pale.”

“Never better,” said the priest. “You were saying...”

“Oh, yes. Where was I? Ah, that’s when the sheriff told me about the car wreck near your place. Some Army sergeant wrapped his car around a pole near your house. He said you seemed calm but he noticed Emily was pretty upset, like she had seen a ghost or something.”

“It was pretty upsetting to see a man die like that even at a distance,” said the priest.

“I agree. Only here’s the thing. Emily never told me about the wreck, nothing, not a thing.”

“Hmm,” said the priest. “You know I told you she was over at my place the other night, her and Lisa both.”

“Lisa was there too?” asked the coach.

“Sure. We were outside playing basketball when it happened.”

“That’s right. You did mention something about that the other night.”

Father Juan waited, wondering what coach Doyle was after. Paul was his friend even though his behavior was pretty stinky the other night. Maybe he was here to apologize, he thought.

“And?” the priest finally said into the stillness.

“Nothing,” said the coach. “I just found it odd that Emily never told me anything about the wreck. Lisa too, come to think of it. Are you sure there’s not something...”

“No,” said the priest, his tone a bit too forced. “Nothing!”

“So,” the coach continued, “you don’t find it odd that she wouldn’t mention something like this?”

“Hmm,” said Father Juan, thinking fast, trying to give himself some emotional distance. “That I don’t know. Yes it strikes me as odd but then again, I’ve never had a girlfriend. I’m afraid as a priest that I’m not qualified at advice on relationships, lacking the requisite experience and all.”

“So you think this is just a relationship issue? That we need to learn to communicate better, or something,” asked the coach?

“Sure,” said the priest, feeling his gut relax. “At least it sounds reasonable to me.”

“Good,” said the coach visibly relaxing. “Me too, communication is something I can work on. I was worried it was something else...”

“Well look, Paul,” said Father Juan, “I’ll give you the one bit of relationship advice I can honestly give as it works for everyone.”

“Shoot.”

“Worry about what we can fix, not about what you can’t. Well, that, and be honest all the time.”

Paul looked thoughtful for a moment, hand on his chin. “You know, that’s not a bad idea, Father. I think I can do that. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” said the priest.

“Then I won’t,” said the coach with obvious good humor. “Just one more thing, Father, before we head out to catch the games – any idea what the Sheriff Johnson would want with Antonio?”

Father Juan smiled though clenched teeth. “Nope,” he said, trying to remain calm, “not at all.”



*(Wednesday 2/9)*

The next day Father Juan had his lunch in the church office while Father Jacob and Emily were out running errands. The game against Happy had gone well for both teams. The Swiftettes going 9-1-0 in league and the Swifts going 8-2-0. They had one more game against Wheeler on Friday but it was out of League and the Mustangs were not a powerhouse this year. The players were far more focused on the beginning of play-offs next week and it was even money they would lose their last game of the regular schedule. Father Juan had heard coach Doyle talking about starting his second string and maybe not even fielding his best players, saving them for the playoff games instead.

All last night, Father Juan had thought about his conversation with the coach in the parish office. It kept playing over and over in his mind. By noon he decided to call Lieutenant Dellarosa to find out if he knew anything about the Sheriff's visit to Alvarez Trucking and the search warrant.

Taking the lieutenant's card from his pocket, Father Juan dialed the number for the Amarillo PD homicide division and waited. He did not have to wait long.

"Dellarosa," said the gruff voice after the call had been patched through.

"Good afternoon, lieutenant," said the priest. "This is Father Juan from Holy Family Parish in Nazareth."

"Oh, hey, Padre," said the lieutenant, his tone turning warm. "How's the God business going?"

"Probably better than the cop business," said Father Juan, "although, come to think of it, I'll bet there's a large part of our clientele that overlaps."

This got a laugh out of the lieutenant. "That is does, padre. That it does. What can I do for you or did you just call to tell me you bumped off another parishioner?"

"Har, har," said the priest. "No one's died today. At least not yet but you know, the day is young. No, Lieutenant, I called about something else, something to do with your investigation into Alvarez."

"Well, then I'm glad you called. It saves me the trouble of calling you. We got a lead last week from narcotics."

"You did," asked the priest?

“Sure, would have missed it completely except the head of narcotics heard my boss chewing me out over this case a couple of weeks back, and put two and two together. It seems Alvarez has a rap sheet as long as your arm and was well known for smuggling narcotics 20 years back. Word is he hasn’t moved anything in ages which is why we’re sitting on our thumbs right now. Or at least we were until we got a tip last week. It doesn’t look like much, so we thought we’d send the sheriff out to his place and see if that stirs up some action. You know, kick the ant hill and see what comes running out.”

“You can’t just go in and look?”

“Naw, the tip is not strong enough. To be honest, I doubt we’ll even get a search warrant. We need more evidence. I’ve had a few accountants going over his other holdings but it looks like he is either totally legit or has some excellent money laundering skills. Either way we have no good cards in our hand. That’s why we decided to play a bluff and see what happens. It’s the only reason.”

“Hmm,” said the priest. “That doesn’t sound so good.”

“It’s not, Father. The only reason we have what we have is because Alvarez’s name came up in the middle of another investigation. At least that other investigation had enough evidence for a wiretap. I don’t even have that for Alvarez.”

“And you haven’t heard anything about the wells?” the priest asked.

“To be honest, father, I wouldn’t even know how to investigate that, let alone find what law he is breaking, if he is breaking one. It’s not exactly illegal in the state of Texas to run your well until your neighbors’ goes dry, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes, I see your point, lieutenant. I’m afraid then I’ve been wasting your time. I just don’t know what else to do. It’s been almost ten weeks and the people in town are starting to get desperate and, well, who else can I tell?”

“Don’t worry, Padre, something will turn up. You’ll see. It always does. Somewhere out there is the evidence connecting Alvarez to those wells drying up. All we have to do is keep looking around until it turns up.”

“Hmm,” said the priest again. “Hey didn’t you get in trouble for looking into Alvarez before? Won’t the sheriff’s visit cause you even more grief?”

“Yes, Father. We’re counting on it. We’re hoping that we’ll learn something from whoever calls to complain first. Sort of ‘the squeaky wheel gets the cop,’ if that makes any sense.”

“About as much as any other part of this drought,” said Father Juan. “This...

this thing really is a mystery, isn't it lieutenant?"

"Yes padre, it is. All we need is a train, an ice-pick and butler."

"A what?"

"A butler, father. Every good mystery needs a butler. That or a man with a wooden leg. Something."

"Oh, I get it. Forgive me, lieutenant. I don't read many mysteries."

"Good," said the cop. "Neither do I. That way we don't know how bad we're doing, si?"

"Si, amigo. Thanks for taking my call and for trying to cheer me up..."

The lieutenant started to protest but Father Juan cut him short. "Don't tell me you're not trying to blow smoke up my... ah, up my collar," he said with a smile. "I've been on that side of the conversation too, you know, more than once."

"Okay, Father. You got me," said the lieutenant.

"Good," said the priest. "Tell your wife I said hello and give your kids a hug."

"Will do, Father. Good-bye."

"Adios."

## Chapter 39

*(Friday 2/11)*

Father Juan woke up the following Friday morning with a headache. He knew what it was – stress often found him clenching his jaws in his sleep. He just couldn't figure out why he was stressed now. He was happier than he'd been in a long time. He liked this town, he liked the parish, he liked the people he worked with and he especially liked the basketball team. Heck, he even liked the occasional pick-up game with Mali.

So what was bugging him?

Rolling out of bed, he held a hand to his head and walked slowly to the bathroom where he kept the aspirin. He popped 4 into his mouth and swallowed

them with cold water from the sink. The cold water made his teeth ache. Rubbing his jaw, he stumbled into the kitchen and started up the coffee, watching the brown liquid dribble through eyes that felt like sandpaper.

After a while, he got up and turned on the kitchen faucet, letting the water drain until it got warm. Then he filled the kitchen sink with water, so hot he could barely stand it. Glad that he had cleaned up the sink the night before, he took a deep breath, dunked his head underwater and held it there as long as he could.

A few years back Father Juan had perfected this trick of relaxing by dunking his head under hot water while holding his breath. It proved a handy way to help relax the muscles in his head that locked up from the tension. It took him a while but after several dunkings he could start to feel his jaw and neck relax. Shaking the worst of the water out of his short hair, he dried his head as best he could with a kitchen towel and then wrapped it around his neck while he poured himself a cup of coffee.

The bathroom mirror showed him red-faced with blood-shot eyes and hair poking out in every which way. It made him look like he had stuck his finger in a light socket. The thought of shocking himself made him smile.

Leaving his hair still half dry, Father Juan changed into his workout clothes and went out for his customary jog. With any luck the cooling effect of the wet hair would counteract the coffee which woke him up but also left his head feeling careworn and fragile.

After a few miles, his back began to loosen up and his pace increased. Without thinking, he realized at one point he was running at a pace much faster than normal. He forced himself to slow down and watched his speed carefully, swinging his arms harder and lengthening his stride by lifting himself higher off the ground with every step. He had had the occasional run in which his normal pace was simply not as intense as his body required but it had been years since the last time.

What is up with me, he kept asking himself. By the time he got home and pulled his sweatshirt from around his waist, he had an idea but he didn't want to think about it. It was just too weird.

He ran the shower colder than normal and let the icy stream pound his head and neck, increasing the blood flow. All the while he kept asking himself, why am I so angry? What has made me so mad?

He got to the parish and the regular schedule lulled him into forgetting his headache. Except for a tendency to shake a knee up and down while seated

before the computer, his day was pretty normal. He left work a bit early to get his dinner before the game.

Standing in front of his stove turned out to be difficult. He kept pacing back and forth in the small apartment, too anxious to sit still. He ate with one leg or another constantly shaking. Finally he bolted down his food, grabbed his jacket and headed out the door.

The cool air was refreshing and his body all but pulled him along towards the gym. His legs were working hard to catch up with his will, like a small boy trying to keep pace with his parents. When he got to the gym, he realized there was no way he could not sit still in the crowd. It was simply not possible. Figuring a walk around the block might slow him down he headed up the street going North, his mind furiously trying to figure out what was bothering him.

It wasn't until he found himself in front of the pump house at the old Seller's place, that he realized he wasn't just angry, he was enraged. Now he was sure. Someone was harming his town! Someone was deliberately hurting his friends!

He stomped past the mysteriously working pump without a glance, walking hard, his legs pounding the ground as he followed the new pipe from the field up to where it joined the back of the warehouse. The large number 8 was still visible on its side in the moonlight.

Finding no door in the back, Father Juan stomped along its side and around to the front where a single light shown over a small door. The door was unlocked and Father Juan soon found himself inside a large warehouse. The inside was dark, the walls and ceiling open and cold. Several long tables ran the length of the room. They were covered in something, bags of something – plastic bags. The light was bright enough to reflect off the plastic but too faint to see what was inside. His breath fogged in the cold air and his footsteps echoed as he walked to the back where the new pipe entered the building. It made a 90 degree turn and lead straight into the ground not ten feet from the wall. Stymied, Father Juan looked around and saw a doorway near the pipe. The wall came out into the warehouse several feet but didn't look like a separate room. Perhaps behind the door was a stair well.

Father Juan walked up to the door. Just over the top he could see a symbol or sign. It was hard to make out in the feeble light from across the warehouse but it looked like a small metal plaque with a owl engraved on its surfaced. The eyes sparkled reddish in the feeble light, like they were made of rubies. Father Juan stared at the owl for several seconds then just before he reached the door handle he heard a noise, the sound of someone talking.

Turing back to the way he came in, he saw someone enter the warehouse though the door he had left open. It was hard to see who it was as they were in silhouette by the light behind them. Whoever it was, they were holding up a cell phone to their ear and talking intently.

“I don’t care what your problem is,” the person said, anger obvious by his tone, “you’ll get this shit out of here and you’ll do it now!”

Father Juan slowly walked forward, trying to get a better look at the strange man.

After a pause the stranger continued, “I don’t give a fuck about your problems, you piss ant little peoñ. I made your ass and I can unmake it.”

The man started pacing and waving his arm to make his point.

“I’m the one who set you up on your first job,” wave, “and I’m the one who lent you the money to start your damn plumbing business.” Wave. “Hell, I’m the one who put your kids through college so they would never need to do the stupid shit you used to do. So don’t you dare tell me you can’t help me out. God damn it, Gabriel! I need you.”

The stranger was now yelling loud enough that Father Juan walked up close to him without his notice. He started fumbling along the wall, waving his hands at something in the dark.

“Don’t give me any excuses, you pinche pendejo. I need you. Now! Not next Tuesday,” the man thundered. “What?” he yelled after a moment. “Well. Fuck. You,” he yelled. As if to punctuate his anger, the stranger leaned back and launched the cell phone hard into the wall. It shattered into a hundred pieces sounding like a shot against the metal wall. The pieces fell, tinkling like rain on the concrete floor. The man was facing away from Father Juan and panting. His chest was heaving, trembling in anger, his breath loud in the empty room.

The sound of the smashed phone brought Father Juan to his senses. He suddenly realized he was standing twenty feet from a man who was mad enough to kill. This struck him as a particularly stupid place to be.

Just as Father Juan slowly started creeping back into the dark of the warehouse, the man waved his arm near the wall. He must have found the switch because this time the lights came on.

Caught in the sudden light, Father Juan stopped and stared. The man turned slowly into the room. In the bright light Father Juan recognized him right away. It was Antonio, Antonio Alvarez. His hair was disheveled, his white suit a mess. There were tears on his cheeks and his eyes had the crazed look of a trapped

animal but there was no mistaking him. Yet, this was not the slick and urbane Antonio Alvarez that Father Juan knew. This was another man. A man who looked just like Antonio Alvarez but lacked the man's confidence, his poise, his self-assuredness. This was the shell that was left, after a man had been emptied of courage.

In all his years as a priest, in all the times he had faced death, in its countless forms, Father Juan had never seen such remorse, such destruction. In an instant, he went from being afraid of the man to feeling pity for him.

Alvarez slowly walked into the room eyes downcast. As he did his confidence started to fill back in. His face opened up, his eyes started to pick up their old gleam, as his head rose and his walk gained its old poise. It was like watching a balloon inflate inside the man, pushing his soul into shape by sheer force of will.

He was just about back to his old self when he saw Father Juan. He stopped as if he hit an invisible wall, his eyes going wide as his mouth shaped the word his brain was too scared to say.

Alvarez slumped against a long table and fell into a chair with a slump. "No," he whispered, "no."

"No!

"NOOO!

"NOOOOO! God Damn you Father Juan. NOOOOO!"

Alvarez pounded the table with his fists, then stopped and crumpled. His face looked like he was fighting a battle inside. His fists squeezed until his knuckles turned white, his neck tightened, the veins sticking out, his back bent and shook with effort.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Father Juan saw a look creep over his face, the man inside fighting it inch by desperate inch. It was a look Father Juan had come to know well, very well. He had seen it many times too many, four hundred eighty nine times to be exact. It was the look of a man about to confess. Confess for his very last time.

"Oh, my, God," Alvarez said. "Is there anything I can do? Any way to stop this?"

Father Juan answered quietly, almost a whisper, "I'm sorry, amigo. No."

"You've tried," the man all but begged.

Father Juan looked at him, face filled with sorrow, tears in his eye. "Every time, every single time, believe me." The sorrow in his voice left no doubt about

his efforts.

“Forgive me, Father Juan but I had to ask.”

“I understand.”

Alvarez looked into the priest's eye and held them. “Yes,” he said. “I believe you do understand.”

The pain in Alvarez's eyes was suddenly more than he could bare. In an effort to stop his own heart from breaking, Father Juan looked away. All along the table where Alvarez slumped were plastic bags filled with white powder, large bags, each about the size of a ten pound sack of flour. They stretched away in both directions down the table, stacked next to each other neatly. There were hundreds of them. Father Juan reached out to the table next to him, hand shaking and touched the first bag in reach. It was coke, cocaine, hundred and hundreds of pounds of it. It was a fortune. It was more money than Father Juan had ever seen in one place. More cocaine than his family had ever sold, even on their best days. It was beautiful. It was ruin.

“Oh my God,” whispered the priest, as he slumped closer to Alvarez. “What,” he said and then swallowed hard, his throat suddenly dry. “What are we going to do, Antonio?”

“Oh, God, father,” cried Alvarez. “Oh God...”

## Chapter 40

Father Juan found a battered stool and sat down heavily. He could feel the old turning in his chest, that feeling he got every time someone was going to confess. It sat heavy on him, as if trying to crush him. After over 400 times he still wrestled with the same old doubts; was he doing the right thing? He let the storm of angry thoughts flow over him, finding a secure spot in his knowledge that this was never his will, never something he tried to bring about. Only this time it was harder to not see his own involvement, his own passion. In his anger he might have overlooked the feeling coming on and gone back home, avoiding the warehouse altogether but that path was no longer open for him, regardless if he was at fault this time or not. He opened his eyes and looked up at Alvarez.

“You okay Padre?” the older man said. He was seated on a similar stool, eyes



clear, and a slight bemused smile on his face. The transformation surprised Father Juan and it must have shown on his face.

“Surprise!” Alvarez said.

“But you’re not...”

“Weeping? No father, I’m not. We knew this day was coming for a long time, ever since Lucy was born. My life, that life, ended a long time ago. All this,” he said as he indicated the warehouse around them, “has been a blessing, gifts given to a condemned man awaiting his execution. No, we knew my life would end one day but neither one of us expected it would come at the hands of a priest.”

“I’m so sorry, Antonio. Had I known...”

Alvarez raised his hand, “Please Father, do me a favor and don’t apologize. I’d rather die with you than from a bullet of a gangster. In many ways this is a blessing, just like my wife and three daughters, one I am neither worthy of, nor deserve.”

Antonio got up and started looking under the tables. “How much time do I have?” he asked. “Is there any time limit to this thing?”

“Not that I know of,” said Father Juan in a detached tone, “but no two deaths are ever the same.”

“I suppose not,” said Alvarez, still searching under the tables, “although I will defer to your experience.” I know that pinche pendayo Doyle keeps a bottle around here somewhere.” Near the end of a row he reached under and pulled out a bottle. “Ah, that is more like it.” He held the bottle up. It was half full of an amber liquid that sloshed as he gestured with it. “Normally I would not serve such cheap whiskey to an honored guest but I’m afraid this is all I can afford at the moment. Would you care to join me in a drink? You look like you could use one.”

Father Juan smiled sheepishly. “Si, amigo, I believe I could.”

Antonio spread his hands. “It appears I have no glasses. Would you be okay with sharing this bottle like old friends?”

“You honor me, Antonio,” Father Juan said as he accepted the bottle. With that he turned the bottle up and took a deep swallow.

“No, my friend,” said Antonio. “It is I who is the honored one. Now I can brag that I shared a bottle with El Ángel de la Muerte. Who else can say that?”

Father Juan exhaled sharply, as his body started shaking. Hard liquor always

had that effect on him, especially with the first swig – that was why he rarely drank it. He handed the bottle back to Antonio quickly as if he might drop it.

“Does the name bother you father?” Antonio asked. “I can use another.”

“No, amigo,” the priest said in a gasp. When he could breathe again he continued, “The whiskey is stronger than I am used to. That is all.”

“Ah,” said Alvarez taking a swallow. “Hoo, you are right, father. This is not the smooth clear Tequila that Ricco used to sell up on East First in Boyle Heights?”

“Ricco?” Father Juan asked. “You mean the guy with three fingers who used to sell home-made Tequila out of his apartment across from the cemetery?”

“The very one.”

“You knew him?”

“A little. I had a cousin who used to sell coke out of his car in Boyle Heights. I came up to visit him one summer. I was a hick Mexican with a thick accent from Southern Texas. My cousin introduced me to Rico thinking he would get a laugh. Instead, Rico and I hit it off. Turned out, we came from the same home town.”

“¿Cuál?”

“Ciudad Juarez, near El Paso at the border. I was born there but my family moved over to El Paso before I started school. At the time I was 16, had a fast car and a brother who worked for the Federales. My cousin thought I was a dumb hick but Rico looked past the boy and saw the ambition within. He hooked me up with a cousin of his and that’s how I made my money in High School when I wasn’t playing football – moving product across the border.”

“What did your cousin think of you then?”

“Him? At first he didn’t believe it. Then he tried to cut his way in on the action saying I owed him a percentage because he hooked me up with Rico.”

“What’d you do?”

“Nothing at first, he was family. But then the stupid shit threatened to narc on me so I killed him.”

Father Juan looked surprised. “Just like that?” he asked.

“Si,” said Antonio, “just like that. He got in my way and I was ambitious. Back then that was all the reason I needed.”

Father Juan nodded. He had grown up with a family like this and had seen first hand the results.

“Was he your first?” asked the priest.

“Murder? Yes, but not the last.” Antonio took another swig of whiskey and passed the bottle to the priest. Father Juan took one himself and then stared into the depths of the bottle. “Relax, padre. We’re going to be here a while.”

Hours later, with most of the bottle missing, Antonio Alvarez and Father Juan sat opposite each other, heads bowed. Alvarez had just finished confessing his last crime and Father Juan was trying to piece it all together. It was a lot to take in. Even though he had drunk his fair share of the whisky, Father Juan did not feel drunk. Rather he felt curiously aware, more alive than he had felt in ages. Everything in the room seemed crisp, clear, his thoughts sharp, cool.

After several minutes of thought he finally asked, “Okay, I understand the drugs and murders. All of that makes some kind of sense. But that was years ago and so different from the man in front of me now that if anyone else told me this, I would not believe them. It’s almost as if you are describing another man, another life. What happened? What made you change?”

Antonio smiled his best smile. “You’re going to laugh, Padre, because it sounds so silly. But I swear to you, on blood of the virgin, it is true. What happened was I fell in love with a pretty girl. Me. I was rich, I was powerful. I was feared all over Northern Mexico. I could have almost any woman I wanted and often did. But then one day I met Lupé and I just knew. It was like a switch going off. One morning I woke up an ambitious criminal and by that night it was gone. She did not have to tell me I needed to leave the criminal kingdom I had created, and to her credit, she never did. One look at her and I knew what I had to do, so I did it.”

“It was not easy, mind you. We lived for several years on the run and in constant fear. But she stood by me and loved me regardless of my past and I have tried all these years to be the man worthy of her love.”

“It’s a funny thing, padre, to have the love of a woman enter your life and wash away all the old ideas and feelings; to make you truly understand how much being a man is, more than the posing and drunken swaggering of our youth. She made me believe in that. She believed I could be a man, a man she could respect and her belief in me is what helped me to believe in myself. Such is the power of a good woman in a man’s life and why you will always see me at the altar of the virgin for I have been blessed with the love of a woman who has

a part of the holy virgin in her – I am convinced of this – and if it can transform a man like me, a very ugly and vicious man, then it can transform anyone.”

Alvarez stopped and after a pause reached over to place a hand on the priest’s shoulder. “I am only sorry that you cannot know this feeling too, Padre. You of all men could use such a gift right now.”

Father Juan smiled, uncomfortable to be the focus of the conversation. “Oh I believe I have been blessed by the virgin myself,” he said but his voice lacked the conviction of Alvarez. “As for the other kind of love from a woman,” he continued, “that part of my life is long over.”

“Over? Oh I doubt that. Something tells me one day you will find this kind of love, amigo, and it will change your life.”

Father Juan looked at Alvarez with concern. “I know you mean well, Antonio, but please understand, such a thing would ruin me. It would trample my sacred vow and undo all I have worked for; all that I have become.”

Antonio laughed a hearty laugh and the sound echoed in the warehouse like a bell. Father Juan looked on perplexed not knowing how to respond but soon found himself chuckling along with his friend's great mirth. Before long both men were laughing so hard they rocked back and forth on their seats and had tears in their eyes. Finally, when Antonio could catch a breath, he managed to say between spurts of laughter, “Of course it would ruin you, amigo. *That* is the point.”

Father Juan looked stunned at this and found himself wondering if his ruin was a good idea. He suddenly laughed. “Then,” he said, with a reckless grin on his face, holding up what was left of the whisky bottle, “will you share a last drink with a friend, and toast to my ruin?”

“Not your ruin amigo,” Alvarez replied. “*Our* ruin.”

“Very well,” the priest continued, soberly. “Will you drink to our ruin?”

Alvarez solemnly took the bottle from the priest’s hand and raised it before them. “The love of a good woman,” he said deeply. “Our blessing and our ruin.”

The bottle was passed and both men drank deeply.

Moments later, both men sat still in the large warehouse; the mirth of their conversation deflating, leaving behind the hard question of what to do next.

Father Juan sat quietly and could feel the cold of the room seep into his butt and his legs. He'd been sitting in one place too long. For the first time he noticed he could see the fog of his breath in the harsh overhead lights. He slowly looked around. He didn't know if it was the whiskey or the late hour but the reflections of the overhead lights off the bags of cocaine were sharp in his eyes like pin pricks. They reminded him that they still had issues to face, problems to deal with. It was time to face the real world.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. "We should call Lupé," he said. "No doubt she is worried."

Alvarez looked up at Father Juan as if he was dragging himself from a dream. He blinked a couple of times and then slowly checked his watch, a Rolex. "You're right," he said. "We should."

The men looked into each other's eyes but neither attempted to move.

"She doesn't know about this," the priest said. It was a statement, not a question.

"No, this was supposed to be a last deal to help out an old friend. One I didn't want but was kind of talked into." He gave off a short dry laugh. It was a laugh without any humor. "I guess I lost my edge, Padre. Got too soft and let my guard down."

Father Juan smiled with just the corners of his lips. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

Alvarez smiled at the priest's irony. "No I guess not, amigo. But it stills leaves me with a large problem and only a few moments to deal with it."

Father Juan stared away into space, looking thoughtful. Suddenly he slapped the old gangster on the back. "You know," he said, "I think I have an idea." He rubbed his hands together to warm them, as both men stood up. "Oh, yes," he said. "I have an idea and I think you're going to like this one, amigo, yes I do."

The priest threw his arm around Alvarez's shoulder and started whispering quickly. Before long the eyes of the old gangster grew large in delight and the two men started whispering back and forth animatedly, the fog from their breath billowing between them like smoke from a small fire.

## Chapter 41

The sun was long past the horizon when Father Juan finally trudged up the stairs to his room. The whiskey and later black coffee had left an ashy taste in his mouth, like his teeth were covered in little tiny socks, socks that smelled. His eyes were grainy and red rimmed from crying and a lack of sleep. His head felt like it had been run over by an emotional tractor and in a very real sense it had.

In just one night he had become fast friends with Antonio Alvarez. He had gotten to know more about the man than even his wife of many years had known. They had laughed, cried and shared many things and then, when it was over, he had closed Antonio's eyes for the last time. The talk between the men had been easy, candid, refreshing. Their common past and their common purpose had twined them closer than Father Juan had ever felt with anyone. It was like finding a long lost brother, one that knew all about his past and his strange curse and yet was not afraid. Watching Antonio die had affected Father Juan in some deep way. It was terrible and wonderful at the same time. That he should meet such a friend and then be the instrument of his death, all in one night, was overwhelming.

And yet that was not all. Calling Lupé, meeting her and the girls at the warehouse, holding them while they cried, it had all been like a dream, a very bad dream. The Alvarez ladies had clung to Father Juan like a raft in a storm. And then just as suddenly, they had held him up as the emotions of the evening finally took their toll. In the end he could not have told who was helping who; only that he felt like he had just gained a family and lost a best friend. In a very real sense, both were true.

He had finally left after Emily showed up, as well as Father Jacob. By then the word had gone out to many members of the parish and even in the early hour they had raced to surround and support the grieving family. This struck Father Juan as yet another miracle, in a night full of miracles.

After several fumbles with his keys, Father Juan let himself into his room and closed the door. He had one more duty to perform before he could get some much needed sleep. He gingerly set himself down in his reading chair and called up a number from memory.

"Amarillo P.D. Homicide," said the voice on the line.

"May I speak to Lieutenant Dellarosa," said the priest wearily.

"One moment please. May I ask whose calling?"

Father Juan smiled. "Tell him," he said, "it's an old priest with a death wish."

"I'm sorry sir?" said the voice on the line. "Did you say a priest with a death wish?"

"My apologies, officer, it's been a long night. Please tell him that Father Juan of Holy Family Parish would like to speak with him if he has a moment."

"Sure thing, Father," said the voice. Then the hold music came on.

After a short moment Lieutenant Dellarosa picked up the phone. "Hey Padre," he said. "I heard a rumor that people are dying to confess to you."

"Ha, ha," said Father Juan. "Believe it or not, I've heard that a time or two."

"I'll bet you have," said the lieutenant. "You don't sound so good, Padre. What can I do for you?"

"Believe it or not, Marco, I have a confession to make."

"You?" said the lieutenant. "This I have got to hear."

"Well you may not think so after I tell you."

"That bad, huh?"

"Worse."

"Hmm," said the lieutenant. "Why not tell me and let me be the judge of that?"

"Okay," said Father Juan. "Remember how I was telling you about Antonio Alvarez, and the wells drying in our little community?"

"Yes Padre."

"Well it turns out your friends in Vice were right. Alvarez used to be hip deep into drugs and killing."

"Used to be?"

"Yep, he stopped many years ago."

"Well that's great then isn't it?" said the cop.

"Yes and no," said the priest. "There's more."

"More? What more and why do I not like the sound of that?"

"Well I discovered that even if the sins are many years old, a person still will need to confess them to me."

"Still? After many years? Wait. Don't tell me."

“That’s right,” said the priest. “I think I really blew it, Marco. I really did.”

## Chapter 42

*(Sunday 2/13)*

Father Juan woke early on Sunday morning, got up and said his prayers. He sat down to a light breakfast and found himself staring into the rings on the table left from his coffee cup. His eyes felt grainy and tired. His sleep had been fitful, not restful. Remembering his trip to the Alvarez house the day before, kept haunting him. Lupé and the two girls had greeted him at the door like a long lost friend. He found the whole family to be neither weepy nor dramatic. At times they shed tears but they were always quick to focus on the good things Antonio had done. His past was an open secret in their household. They even had jokes about it within the family. Whenever Antonio would get heavy handed with the children they would call him El Senior Drug Lord which always left the man in fits of laughter. They were used to living with the knowledge that he might die at any moment so his actual death was not the shock it might have been. Father Juan left with the impression that it was he who went there for comfort and not the other way around.

After he cleaned up, Father Juan put on a coat against the February chill and headed out the door. At the bottom of the stairs he decided to walk around the back to see how the shrine to Santa Muerte fared. The shrine had been recently cleaned and a new candle added; a red one. He was still puzzling the significance of the new candle when he reached the back hall of the parish and took off his coat.

Father Juan knew that Father Jacob had already arrived because he could feel the heat was on and he could smell the delicious scent of fresh coffee coming from the kitchen. He found the older priest on his knees at the side altar for the Madonna. He quietly started backing out the sanctuary as he didn’t want to interrupt the senior priest but Father Jacob looked up from his prayers and waved him over. When Father Juan got closer the senior priest got up and held both of his hands in his own. “How are you doing, Father?” the older priest asked with genuine concern.

Father Juan was about to respond with a polite “I’m fine” when he realized it



wasn't so. "To be honest, Father," the junior priest said, "I really don't know."

Father Juan was about to say more when they both heard the sounds of people entering the back hall. The senior priest said, "We really should talk but I don't think we'll get time today. I hope that is okay." Then he gave Father Juan's hand a light squeeze as if to apologize for the delay and then walked towards the sounds of the people.

The service that morning reminded Father Juan why he liked the church so much. Antonio Alvarez had touched many people in the small community and they all came to the church to both pay their respects and to grieve. The Latinos filled the kitchen with children, colorful clothes, laughter and spicy cooking. The Anglos dressed more somber and out of respect left their baseball caps at home. Father Juan thought he saw more carefully combed hair on the tops of more men's heads than ever in his life. The little community surrounded Lupé Alvarez like a queen, protecting her and holding her up as if helping her could somehow make them feel better as well. Señora Espinoza and Mrs. Keim quietly directed the events outside of the actual mass and made sure everything ran smoothly.

But it was the mass itself, with its ever present themes of sacrifice and redemption that touched the people most. Alvarez's death somehow turned the more abstract death of Christ, into a real event and lent the words of the benediction an extra weight. Similarly, the life of Alvarez and his many gifts to the community perfectly paralleled the life of Christ. His many gracious acts gave the Holy Communion, the most giving part of the mass, a greater weight in everyone's heart. By the time the communion was over there was not a dry eye in the sanctuary. Looking up from the altar, Father Juan could find only damp eyes and bright smiles. He could not think of a more fitting tribute to Alvarez and this thought made the heaviness in his heart roll away like a stone and tears fell down his face. A quick glance told him Father Jacob was equally affected.

Neither man made an attempt to wipe their tears away.

After the service, the back hall was filled to overflowing with laughter and eating, as the people cemented their common grief in the twin bonds of fellowship and food. Father Juan once sat next to an anthropologist on a long bus ride back when he was a young priest and had little money. The man had told him at length how every culture mixed food into their religious services and observations. At that time Father Juan had thought the man supercilious, but now, standing next to the parish kitchen door and watching the members talk and eat, he realized the truth of the man's words. Food was the church. It was the cement that glued the fellowship and its value was almost as important as

that of prayer. The heart of the mass, after all, was Jesus telling his disciples, "Here, eat this and remember me."

By the time the last person had left and the priests were ready to close up the sanctuary for the afternoon, Father Juan realized that his mood was changed and his heart was light.

Later that day he told his observations to Father Jacob, as they sat in the sun in the little kitchen nook at the parsonage. They were going over the records for that morning and discussing what worked and what they would do differently, sort of like a post game meeting with the coach and team, only in this case, the coach was also a player. It was a habit the two had gotten into early in November and by now was routine. Father Jacob had looked thoughtful for a second and then said, "You know, I never thought of food in that way but it sounds right, doesn't it?" Then after a few moments he asked, "Do you suppose there is any way we could improve on that? Use food for the parish in a more effective way?"

Father Juan sat for a moment and then said, "Not off the top of my head but maybe we should ask Emily, or even better, our twin gossips."

"Good idea," said the senior priest. "Between the two of them, I'm sure they'll have as good an idea about the needs of the parish as we do, and probably even better. Did you see them working together this morning?"

Father Juan smiled, "Looked more like a tag team to me. I've never seen a better pair of mother hens in my life. When the Ellison's son, you know, the tall one, what's his name? Elroy. When Elroy did a sloppy job cleaning the table tops, I saw Mrs. Keim give him a stern lecture while Mrs. Espinoza got that pretty little Sanchez girl, uh Phillipa, to help him out. He sure cleaned those tables well, once she showed up. I think he did each table twice in order to impress her. Poor boy didn't realize he was being worked from both ends."

Father Jacob laughed at this and slapped his knee. "And to think," he said, "some people think *we're* the ones in charge. If they only knew."

"If they only knew," the junior priest repeated.

Both men sat quietly and stared into their coffee cups, letting the warmth from the sun through the kitchen window relax them. Condensation brushed the bottom of the window and a breeze outside made the thin dead branches quiver and shake. Steam rose from each man's mug as they sat there enjoying the silence of each other's company.

After a while Father Juan broke the moment with a more somber tone, "You know I did overhear one thing today, I should probably tell you," he said. "It's

probably nothing, but..."

"But?"

"Well, while I was out back, checking on the preschool room after we ate, I heard a group of men talking off to the side near the parking lot."

"And?"

"Well one of them said something that disturbed me a little. You're going to think I'm a little crazy. It even sounds crazy to me just thinking about it."

"What'd he say," the senior priest asked straightening up in his seat?

"Well, he told the other man that he thought I was, rather that, Padre Muerte was a saint."

The senior priest raised his eyebrows. "A saint?" he asked, surprise unmasked in his tone.

"Si, I mean yes," said Father Juan. "I know it sounds crazy..."

"Crazy? Hell yes. But what does this, this..." he said, searching for the words. "What does this Father Death have to do with you?"

"It is one of the things they sometimes call me, a nickname I guess."

"Father Death?"

"Si."

"A nickname?" This time the senior priest's eyebrows practically raised off his face.

"I suspect the name loses something in translation. The words don't mean the same thing as they do in English."

"They don't?"

Father Juan sighed.

"Go on," Father Jacob said. "I suspect there is more that you wanted to say besides the cultural differences in the word death."

Father Juan looked grateful. "Yes Father. You see the other men there reacted just like you did, with surprise and even a little scorn. But the man was adamant. He said he had proof."

"Proof? This I gotta hear. What did he say?"

"Well," Father Juan continued. "I know this is going to sound silly but he said the reason why he knew I, uh Padre Muerte was a saint was because he could kill a man and the police would not arrest him. He said it was one of the signs."

The senior priest looked thoughtful for a moment, then he asked, “Did you see who said this?”

“No,” said Father Juan. “I was called away by Señora Espinoza. By the time I returned, the men were gone.”

“And have you ever killed anyone?”

“No, father.”

“Well, in that case,” said the senior priest, “you’re right. I do think it's silly.”

“You do,” Father Juan asked in surprise?

“Yes, I do,” said Father Jacob.

“So you don’t think I should worry about this?”

The older man looked Father Juan in the eye and said, “Son, there are a lot of things you should worry about and quite a few things you might worry about but this one doesn’t sound like either.” The senior priest paused to take a sip of coffee. “Put it this way, if you were a saint, how would you know? It’s not as if saints carry halos around in their pockets, right?”

Father Juan nodded his head.

“No, I wouldn’t worry. I’ve often thought a man could live his whole life not realizing he could end up a saint up until after he died. Knowing before hand might ruin the experience.”

“Hmm,” said Father Juan, “I see.”

“I’ll bet you do,” said the senior priest. “You just keep worrying about the earthly stuff and we’ll let God hand out the halos. Deal?” the senior priest said as he held out his hand.

“Deal,” Father Juan said as they shook hands.

## Chapter 43

*(Tuesday, 2/15)*

They held the funeral mass for Antonio Alvarez on a rainy Tuesday afternoon. Unlike the mass on Sunday, the funeral was private, only family and immediate

friends. Father Juan watched the guests somberly enter the parish and thought the dark grays and blacks the people wore perfectly matched the puffy grey sky. It reminded Father Juan of the day his father was buried. He remembered his Aunt Rosie had taken his hand as they stood outside in the rain and said to him, "Sometimes when it rains, mijo, it is God's tears." He knew this to be a silly conceit that was not "theologically sound" as his professors in college would say but never-the-less he liked to think of it as real. Today, it matched his mood perfectly.

The funeral was small enough that Father Jacob handled most of the pastoral duties which left Father Juan plenty of time to observe and meditate from the back of the sanctuary. He had spent a lot of time at the Alvarez home since the night Antonio has passed, most of it in the company of Emily Hoffman. The two had worked together like a hand in glove and it left a funny feeling in the back Father Juan's mind. He discovered that under stress, Emily was calm and collected; one moment she'd be crying, arms around Lupé and the next, dry-eyed and helping Rosa, the Alvarez's cook, prepare tortillas in the kitchen. In many ways she was the perfect priest, kind, giving, humble; equally able to help with both the emotional turmoil and the need to fill hungry bellies.

Late one night, as they had sat with the family in the living room, sharing a glass of wine and many wonderful stories, Emily and Lupé had walked into the kitchen to get something, leaving Father Juan in a rare moment alone with Lisa Hoffman. She had noticed his eyes following the two ladies into the other room and something in his watching caused Lisa to say, "She's quite a lady, isn't she?"

"Who?" Father Juan asked, surprised by her comment.

"My mom," Lisa said.

Father Juan was about to reply and then stopped. He took a sip of wine and then stared into his glass. "I..." he said quietly with a note of candor, "...Don't think a day goes by that I don't thank God for her," he said turning to look Lisa in the eye in silence. "And..." he continued after a moment, "I think you are incredibly lucky to have her as a mother and as a role-model."

Lisa smiled sadly. "You know she used to be a serious player."

"Hoop?"

"Yes. She'll never tell you how good she was but I did some searching one day after about the fortieth person came up and asked, 'Are you Emily Hoffman's daughter?' I've been All-State for 3 years now, you've seen me play and yet still everyone asks me if I'm *her* daughter."

“She was that good?”

“Better. I found some articles from big name sports guys about her. They all said she was incredible, pure-poetry. One guy even said watching her play ball was like watching Mohammed Ali fight, only better.”

“Better than Ali?”

“Better,” Lisa continued. “Had there been the WNBA back then, I’m sure she would have turned pro. Instead, well, instead she married my dad and had me.” Lisa looked down and stared into her glass of cola watching the scant bubbles fizz to the surface.

“I guess she was younger back then,” she continued, “you know, stupider. Or maybe it was a different time? I don’t know. Much as I loved my father, it was pretty obvious he was not a good match for her. Even at five years old, I sensed it. The people at the church, our family, everyone who knew them both knew their marriage wasn’t working, all except for her and maybe him – especially him.”

Emily and Lupé laughed out loud in the kitchen, the noise and bright light spilling out of the cracks in the door. “The thing is,” Lisa continued, leaning over towards the priest, and speaking softly as if afraid she’d be overheard. “When he died, when she finally came to terms with him, when she finally realized the size of her mistake, she just stopped, stopped dreaming or smiling, or, I don’t know. She just stopped being Emily Hoffman, the basketball star, and started being this other Emily, the shy Emily, the one who seems to be afraid of her own shadow. She just sort of fell into herself.”

“Emily? Father Juan said, disbelief in his voice, “your mother?”

“Yes her,” Lisa said. “I know it’s as hard to believe as the other, isn’t it, if that makes any sense?” Father Juan nodded his head. Lisa looked back at his eyes. “The thing is,” she said, “it’s just as true. People in town used to tell me how great my mom was but I never believed them. It just didn’t match the woman I knew. Then I started playing and some of her shell seemed to slip off. Like watching my game somehow restored her, made her more confident but the funny thing is, you know what really helped her out?”

“What?”

“You,” she said pointing her finger at Father Juan.

“Me,” he said, with surprise in his tone?

“Yes,” she said. “She talks about you all the time, you know?”

“Me,” he said again?

Just then the kitchen door opened and the two mothers returned with fresh wine in their glasses and matching smiles. Father Juan and Lisa turned as the ladies loudly enter the room. Emily looked to her watch and then exclaimed, "Well, I think it's time we left, Lisa. I see Jade was smart enough to crash early and we should follow her example."

Lisa started to protest then thought better. Standing up she said, "Okay mom. I have a test tomorrow and we need practice for the play-offs anyway so maybe that's a good idea." Then she turned to Father Juan. "We'll have to continue this conversation some other time."

"I'd like that," the priest said.

"What are you two up to?" Emily asked?

"Oh you know," said Lisa innocently. "How to win and still keep a smile."

"In hoop?" Emily asked?

"There and other places," Lisa said giving Father Juan a slow and obvious wink.

"Why do I get the feeling you two are up to something," Emily said?

"Don't look at me," Father Juan responded. "She's the one who likes to conspire. I'm just a lowly priest."

"That and a bad liar," Emily said with a laugh.

"Well," Father Juan said, "I will admit to a lack of practice."

"Whatever it was you two were conspiring, it can wait," interrupted Lupé. "We have a firm rule in this house; no conspiring after 9:00. Every one knows it's bad for the digestion."

They all shared a laugh at this. Father Juan helped the ladies clean up and then soon left for home as well.

Now, back at the funeral, watching the people get off their seats to kneel in prayer, the conversation came back to him and made him wonder. What exactly did Lisa Hoffman mean? He could see her down in the front, right next to Jade, holding the girl's hand, almost a mirror image of her mother with her arm around Lupé's back.

For some reason the sight made him glad the girl's team had a by today. The Conference 1A, District 2 basketball play-offs had started but because the girl's were undefeated in Conference play, they had a by. This meant that Lisa and Emily could be here to comfort their friends in their time of need, rather than sitting here but wishing they were with their team.

The boys' basketball team was not as lucky. Already they were on the long trip for Panhandle. Father Juan missed talking with Paul but as coach, his duty was to be with his team, or so he had reported to Emily that morning. Father Juan had overheard this conversation from his little office, as the couple talked in the sanctuary. Father Juan could hear the tension in Emily's voice but didn't understand why and when it came to Paul, he really didn't want to pry. He had still not talked to the coach since the night they had watched the Lakers - Kings game and he didn't know how to tell Emily about the argument without seeming to pry into her private life, something he was loathe to do.

After the funeral was over and most of the guests had left, Father Juan was walking Emily and Lupé to their car when several news reporters and camera crews, intercepted them.

"Mrs. Alvarez," they called out. "Can we have a moment please?"

Lupé was startled by the cameras flashing and the wall of microphones suddenly thrust in her face. She stopped in her tracks but clearly didn't know what to say. Father Juan saw that the normally calm and collected woman was flustered so he stepped between her and the cameras.

"I'm sorry gentlemen," he said in an even voice that covered a growing anger within. "Mrs. Alvarez is not giving statements at this time."

The cameras flashed on the priest. "Is it true," one of the reporters said loudly, "that Antonio Alvarez had dealings with the Mexican mafia?"

Another shouted, "Did Alvarez really have a mistress in Monterrey?"

"Is it true that he had close ties to the Vicente Fox government?"

Father Juan held up his hands until the questions stopped. "Please gentlemen," he said patiently, "Antonio Alvarez was an exceptional man who was greatly loved and appreciated in this small community. He was a model father, very active and involved in the lives of his wonderful daughters and a loyal and faithful husband. In addition, he employed many of the fine men and women from the Nazareth area and was active in his parish and local schools."

The reporters started asking questions as soon as they thought he was finished but he held them off by raising his hands until once again they were quiet. "Please. I'm sure there are a lot of questions about Señor Alvarez's past you would like to discuss. Like many famous people, Antonio Alvarez was a complex man. Yes it is true he had many things in his past which he was not proud of, pretty much like every other man born of a woman. However, those acts, some of which were indeed crimes, have now gone into the grave with the man. I think we should keep them there. I know while he lived Antonio Alvarez



expressed genuine and heartfelt sorrow at some of his past actions and was greatly sorrowful that he could not do more. It haunted his final moments knowing he had not, and in fact could not, do enough to make amends. For some sin, there simply is no amends, at least in this life.”

Father Juan looked at each of the reporters levelly as he gathered his thoughts. At least they were silent this time and didn't interrupt him. “There are a lot of things about Antonio Alvarez worth reporting. I would that you take the words of the bible to heart while speaking of him. Jesus said, ‘Let he who is without sin, cast the first stone,’ and I think this verse applies here to us today. Antonio was a great man and like many great men, he made some great mistakes. Some here would no doubt like to remember just those mistakes. But the Antonio Alvarez I will remember was the man who tenderly loved his wife and three daughters, the man who never missed a daughter's basketball game, never missed a chance to help at the church and never missed a chance to show kindness to others. And at the end of his life, when he knew he was on death's door, his only concern was for the pain his death might cause to those around and not at all for himself. I know it is not popular to talk about men so boring as to be kind and gracious in this day and age but I wish you would take up the practice this one time. For in all my years, never have I met a man who deserved forgiveness more, nor asked for it less.”

“Thank you,” Father Juan continued “and I believe that is it. He turned around and got a nod from Lupé and Emily, both of whom were crying. “Yes he said. That is it. Thank you gentlemen and please be so kind as to let Señora Alvarez walk to her car undisturbed. As most of you can imagine, she has had a hard day.”

The reporters stood there mute for a few moments, long enough for the small group to pass and make their way to the limousine. Father Juan made sure Lupé, Emily, and the girls all got in, before he closed the door. By the time he turned around he saw that the pack of reporters had broken up, each going off to make their final statements in front of their own individual television cameras. The news moment, whatever it was, was over. No one bothered him as he walked back to church door, not until he was almost inside. One reporter called out from behind him, a newspaper man by the looks of him, as he was not wearing a suit and had no camera man.

“Excuse me Father. Excuse me,” he said as he came running up. Father Juan turned and raised an eyebrow by way of a question.

“I'm sorry Father,” the reporter said, “but I didn't get your name.” As he said this, he pulled out an old notebook and a pencil.

“Oh”, said Father Juan politely. “My name is Father Juan Delgado but most people just call me Father Juan.”

“Thank you,” said the reporter, carefully printing his name on the notebook. “That was a nice speech, by the way,” he said as he was writing.

“Excuse me?” said Father Juan.

“That speech. What you said about Alvarez. That was nicely done.”

“Oh. Thank you,” said the priest. “One does try.”

“Did you know him well? Alvarez, I mean?”

“Not for most of his life, unfortunately,” said Father Juan. “But at the end, he became a good friend. One I miss more now than I thought possible.”

“We’re you with him at the end?”

“Yes,” Father Juan said hands folded in front of him.

“I mean,” the reporter said, “were you with him when he died?”

Father Juan looked at him sharply and raised one eyebrow. “Are you asking me if I took his last confession,” he asked?

The reporter nodded with a smile.

“Then, yes.”

“Did he really do all the things they say he did,” asked the reporter?

Father Juan frowned. “That, I’m afraid,” he said, “is between him and God.”

“So you won’t say, or cannot say?”

“Both,” said the priest.

“Thank you Father,” said the reporter.

“You’re most welcome, son.”

## Chapter 44

*(Thursday 2/17)*

On Thursday, Father Juan got off work early and made the short walk to his

apartment in the twilight of the end of the day. He picked up his mail from Mali's mom, and started going through the small pile on his way up the stairs. Half-way up he stopped. In the pile was another letter from the weirdo who had written him before in November. He recognized the same sloppy handwriting and the same return address. With a sigh, he finished climbing the stairs and set the pile down on his small desk. Then he wearily sat down and fished for his letter opener in one of the desk's drawers. It was a stiletto, back from the days when his family ran a gang and being a tough guy with a flashy knife was his idea of manhood. He kept the knife partly out of affection, partly as a reminder of his own hubris; also because it was an excellent tool for opening letters. He didn't like to waste things if he could help it and throwing the old knife away, no matter what its previous value was, seemed a waste to him. The old knife opened in his hand with a well-oiled click and he expertly sliced open the envelope. As before, there was a handwritten letter accompanied by several photocopies of books. The letter read:

*jaime,*

*forgive me cousin, for not calling you back. one of the students happened to answer the phone when you called, and forgot to give me the message. I don't know whether to be more surprised at the lapse, or that he eventually confessed his error a month later.*

*many years ago I met a priest here named Father Emanuel Standford. he once was a Bishop in the LA area before pride led him to his ruin. We met in the penitent cloisters, each of us seeking divine forgiveness for our earthly sins. we used to sit in the garden and talk after diner. do you remember your sister Ruth's garden on the roof? remember how peaceful it was to sit in the rows of corn and stare at the sky?*

*our garden here is like that, only it is colder and the growing season is shorter.*

*one night Father Emanuel told me a story that I could not believe. we were talking about divine intervention, how the holy-spirit can guide you. he said he once went to confirm a class of graduates from a seminary, only one of the new priests was already confirmed. I asked him how he knew this, how could a priest already be confirmed before he was confirmed. he said the holy spirit told him. he went to put his hands over the man to administer the oil, and he just knew. he even laughed about it because he said he was so shocked that he stopped*

*and stood there unable to move. everyone was looking at him, but he could not move. finally he went on to the next man, and everyone assumed he had confirmed this priest, but he hadn't!*

*I must tell you this story troubled me. there was a priest out there who was not confirmed by the church. I knew this was wrong, a mistake. I stayed up every night in prayer for this poor priest, that he might receive the confirmation from our most holy church.*

*a week later I saw Father Emanuel again, and I shared with him my concerns. do you know what happened to this priest I asked? do you know if he was having trouble in ministering to his parish? how can he minister without the confirmation of our church?*

*Father Emanuel told me not to worry. he said he had been keeping a close eye on the young priest ever since that day, and he in fact showed all the signs of the blessing of the holy spirit.*

*this was many years ago, and no matter how I asked, Father Emanuel would tell me nothing more of this priest. for many years I stopped mentioning the priest to him as it upset him so, but I still prayed for the this poor priest every night.*

*Then a few months ago I got a note from Father Thomas, who is in charge of our little cloister. it asked me to visit Father Emanuel, as he was on his death bed. I went to him immediately. When I got there he looked more dead than alive. then he opened his eyes "Sit" he told me. "don't speak, just listen".*

*he told me that for many years he was troubled, he thought he had sinned in not confirming this one priest. but on his last day on this Earth, the spirit had come to him and told him not to worry. that God had a special purpose for this priest, and had ordained him for himself. he had tears in his eyes, and he told me, "I know you have been praying for this priest, and that is good as he needs prayer. but do not worry in your heart for him, as you know this man, you alone of all living men, know the holy spirit is living in this priest, for you have seen it first hand."*

*Then I realized he was talking about you.*

*I must tell you I was shocked! all those years of praying, and to think it was my own cousin! I have known intellectually for years that our paths were entwined by the holy spirit, but how little I really understood! And oh dear cousin how right he was. of all the priest's I*

*have ever met, your confirmation is the least of my concerns. the power of the holy spirit in you has always been great, glory be to her name. my very being here, and still being alive, is proof of it!*

*glory! glory! glory!*

*Friar Paul*

*ps. more to come.*

Father Juan set the letter down and sat there stunned. The letter reminded him how he and his cousin Pepe used to love to lay down in between the rows of corn in Ruth's garden and stare up at the sky. That was back when they were what? Eight? Nine?

So the mysterious Friar Paul was Pepe Romano, his cousin! He was both the boy he had grown up with and the only man who had ever confessed to him and still lived. Father Juan got up and pulled out the previous letter from his cousin, thanking God that he had saved it rather than throwing it out, which had been his first inclination.

He felt a chill run through him. What did it all mean, and why now? Already taunt from the death of Alvarez, he could feel the lines on his life twisting and turning in ways he could not fathom; vibrating to some song he could not hear.

Behind the first letter was a second one.

*Cousin,*

*I just wrote that last letter when I realized there is something you might not know about.*

*It was a open secret in the family that your mother wanted you to be a priest. You know this, as we all talked about it. but what you may not know is that she was a little bit crazy about it.*

*Do you remember all those weird religious people she used to have come over right after your father was killed? The curanderas with bones in their hair, the witches, and all that? Well you remember how your mother was when she got an idea in her head. Somehow she thought the family business would do better if it had it's own priest. That was what all those shaman's and Butos were about. She was looking for a religious leader for her gang.*

*Your sister Rosa used to joke with me in private, calling them witch doctors, and saying they would come with voodoo dolls and poke pins in them to help Jefa gain more territory. At the time I thought this was pretty funny, but later when your mom started looking to you to become a priest, some of us became concerned. I know for a fact that Ruth confronted her about it, telling her she thought she was pushing you too hard to be a priest. "But Jefa, he loves basketball," she would say, "he not into god."*

*Your mother paid no attention to your sisters, nor anyone else when it came to this. She was going to have a priest in her family and that was that.*

*I know everyone in the family looked up to you, and I know they all confessed to you, as they are now all dead (may their souls find peace), but they were also worried about you. Perhaps the one thing they could not confess to you was that they worried your mother pushed you too hard into the priesthood. I only know this because I was just enough older than you to be included in the family business discussions, back when there were still family business discussions.*

*That last curandera, she was the worst. My mom, your Aunt Ruth, told me she overheard your mother talking with her, just before she left. She said the curandera was furious with your mother. Yelling at her, and warning her there would be grave consequences if the boy was not willing. At the time my mother thought that "the boy" the curandera was talking about was my younger brother Richardo. That was why they moved out with him to Inglewood. She thought by moving across town they could escape your mother or the curandera. Little good it did them (although I do hear from Richardo every once in a while). As our Protestant brothers and sisters are quick to say, the wages of sin are death. You, of all people, know this!*

*But now, when I look back upon that conversation, I think my mother got it wrong. It wasn't Richardo the Curandera was talking about, it was you. I think Jefa wanted the Curandera to confirm you as a priest, and I don't think she cared if you wanted to be a priest or not. You know how Jefa was. She wanted a priest, so you were going to be one.*

*But all this makes me wonder. If it is true, If the curandera did confirm you, as Father Emanuel seemed to think, then what were the "grave consequences" she spoke of? Did she know what kind of*

*priest you would be? Was she aware of how the holy spirit would manifest itself in you? I don't think it is an accident cousin, that the curandera always had an owl or a bat with her, or that she always faced north to pray. Owls and bats are the symbols of Mictecacihuatli, the Aztec wife of Death (Mictlantecuhtli), and north is the Aztec direction of Death. Owls and bats are also the symbols of the beloved Santa Muerta, may she always remain in glory.*

*My mother used to complain your mother's one weakness was that she was afraid of death, afraid of dying. Do you remember all the bones, rosaries, and stuff she used to keep in her room? Perhaps this is the reason she wanted a priest in the family, to protect it from death, or at least protect herself. Could it be that the one reason you and I find ourselves where we do is because of one woman, and her strange obsession with death?*

*This in one of those mysteries in which we may not know the answers until we pass from this life, but I pray that my restless mind and silly research will somehow bring you peace to your troubles, if not understanding. One thing is certain, death has claimed you as her own. May she also offer you her protection, like blood painted on the lintels of the faithful in Egypt, when the time arrives.*

*Yours, in prayer,*

*Friar Paul*

Father Juan put the letter down. He could almost smell the air, the way it felt that morning after the storm broke when he woke up and his world had changed. After he had found his brother's body, he had run to his mother's room. There he found her in bed, lying on her side, face distorted as if she was still angry. In her hand she clutched her rosary, as if that was any protection against the movement of the spirit.

Years later while in seminary he would study the stories of the exodus and read about the final of the ten plagues, the one that killed every first born not protected by marking their with blood. He often wondered if someone had marked the door to his room that night; placed some kind of blood on the door jamb, so that the death that came for his family would pass him by.

But that wasn't how it worked. The death his mother feared so much didn't come from the outside, it came from him, her own son.

## Chapter 45

*(Friday 2/18)*

Father Juan got up early Friday morning and stretched his muscles prior to running. The sky outside his window was the color of an old stainless steel fry pan, all silver with dirty browns and reds. Already it was light by 6:30. Spring was not far away, although in this warm climate it never fully left. The weather report showed a storm was coming in from the south and would drench the place for a couple of days. Good for the crops but bad for jogging, as Father Juan did not like to run wet. He tied his shoes, checked the door, and headed down the stairs. Before long he had stepped into his running head as he liked to call it; that trance like state, not too far from meditation where his feet moved of their own accord as his brain loosened up and skipped thoughts around in his head, like flat stones over a calm pond.

Emily resurfaced in his thoughts more and more, which disturbed the priest on some level in a way he did not fully understand. Lately he had been having erotic dreams of her, quick flashes of her embracing him, holding him. Dreams like this were not new to him after all, he was a fully functioning male. What disturbed him were not the sexual elements, as they were very modest, even by his standards. What disturbed him was that the few times she appeared nude in his dreams it was not as an erotic lover but as something different, something more. Nudity as a representation of sexuality made sense to him but nudity as a symbol of something else, something deeper, some kind of innermost connection, left him confused and a little scared. He was well familiar with using prayer to protect him from the distractions of his latent sexuality, that was a battle fought many times but he did not know what to do about this other thing, this looming closeness. He didn't even know if he should pray to be free of it or pray that it should continue. Being around her left him feeling open and defenseless and yet at the same time it also left him feeling warm and safe. Which was the right path?

As usual, when faced with a dilemma he could not solve, Father Juan resolved to do nothing until he had more clarity about direction. Sometimes the path of the righteous, he liked to remind himself, required the willingness to wait and do nothing. Well he would wait as long as needed. He had faith that God would



direct him when the time was right. Until then, he would abide his ignorance with acceptance. After all, he was a priest.

Feeling refreshed from his run, Father Juan cleaned up and quickly walked the few blocks to the church. He found the back door open and the smell of fresh coffee coming from the kitchen. As he poured himself a cup he could hear the sounds of Father Jacob and Emily talking in the sanctuary. Just as he finished putting the cream back in the refrigerator, Father Jacob came around the corner. He was already putting on a work jacket over plain clothes. Noticeably absent were his clerics which he must have left at the parsonage. Walking with a purpose, the older priest quickly entered the kitchen and started filling his portable mug, the one he used when he needed to take a cup of coffee on the go. Lately that mug had been getting a lot of use.

“Morning, Father Juan,” the senior priest said distractedly as he prepared his coffee. “Glad to see you are here. I got a call from the Johnsons and need to run out and see them before the weather breaks.”

Father Juan leaned against the counter in the kitchen and looked through the kitchen doorway into the back hall of the parish. By the door, unnoticed when he first entered, was the old priest’s tool box, the large portable one he used when he went to go look at engines and such – that explained the clothes and the jacket. Father Jacob must have been called early this morning and was just waiting for Father Juan to arrive so he could leave.

“Looks to be a real gully washer,” said Father Juan,” but I think you have several hours yet before the worst of it hits. That is if I’ve learned how to read North Texas weather right.”

“Let's hope you're right,” said Father Jacob. “Man I hate working in the wet. I must be getting old or something. Time was I would spend a whole day working on an engine in the snow but now...now I think I prefer my heated garage with all my tools handy and the coffee pot always on.”

Father Juan chuckled with the priest in understanding.

“Did you see Emily yet?” the senior asked, changing subjects. “She had something she wanted to show you this morning.”

Just then Emily walked into the church kitchen carrying a large aluminum dish covered in foil. She carefully set the dish down on the counter next to the refrigerator. Under her right arm she was holding a folded newspaper. She placed the paper on the counter then smoothly slid the dish onto an empty shelf in the fridge. “Señora Espinoza,” she said in response to his unspoken question.

Father Juan raised an eyebrow.

“She had some old corn so she ran up a batch of tamales. Some are for us but the rest goes to the ladies’ meeting tomorrow, so don’t be a pig with them like you did last time.”

Father Juan started to protest when she cut him off. “Hey, those aren’t my words,” she said with a smile so he would know she was teasing. “I was simply following directions. Señora Espinoza was quite specific. I’m only the messenger.”

“I see,” said the priest. “If memory serves, the previous time Señora Espinoza dropped off tamales she was offended because I didn’t eat enough of them. Now she is offended because I ate too many. Why do I get the feeling I cannot win?”

“I don’t know *what* you are talking about,” said Emily in mock seriousness.

Father Jacob watched this play out with bemused interest. “If you two are done,” he interrupted, “I’ve work to do and a storm coming on.”

“Oh, puft,” Emily responded. “Father Juan is right. That storm is hours away. You’re just looking for an excuse to go play with your tools.”

Father Jacob smiled. “That may be true,” the senior priest said, “but I really do have work to do and Mr. Johnson really is waiting for me.”

“In his nice warm house, next to his nice warm fire,” Emily replied.

“No doubt,” said Father Jacob. He indicated with his head the folded newspaper still on the counter. “Were you thinking of showing him that?”

“I was getting to it,” she said to the senior priest in protest. Grabbing the newspaper, she turned to Father Juan. “Did you get a chance to see this?” she asked as she folded it open with a quick snap of her wrists and held it out for him to see.

Father Juan glanced at the front page opened to him. The usual bold headlines appeared along with little snippets of stories to entice the reader to go beyond the front page. Down near the bottom was a smaller headline with only a few lines of type underneath. Father Juan glanced at it and then looked again. The headline read “Drug Kingpin Taken Down by Priest.” It took him a moment to get the context.

“What?” he said. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Depends,” Emily said, “on what you’re thinking.” She handed him the paper which he snatched quickly and started reading. The story was continued on

page B10. When he got to the proper page he found a lengthy article and a photo of himself which must have been taken after the funeral. The story mentioned many of his arrests and some of the allegations against him over the years. It also referred to him as Father Death several times.

“Oh, poop!” he said. “Poop!”

“Poop?” said Father Jacob. “Don’t you mean, ‘Oh, shit!’” the older priest said spiritedly.

“Yes father... I mean, no father,” the junior priest mumbled.

“Don’t tease him Father,” Emily said to Father Jacob. He’s had enough of a shock.

Father Jacob leaned over and placed a hand on Father Juan’s shoulder by way of apology. The junior priest stood there in shock, arms at his sides, head down and a cold knot starting in his belly.

“I don’t,” he started to say. “I don’t know what to say, Father.”

“There’s nothing to say,” said the senior priest. “We knew your story might get out. Heck we’ve known that since before you came here.”

“You have?” said Father Juan. “I thought...”

“You thought I didn’t know. Didn’t believe,” said the senior priest.

“Uh, yes. I mean, I guess so.”

“Well I still don’t know what to think but that’s nothing new for me. Thinking is not exactly the most important part of my job. But I do know a good priest when I see one and ever since you’ve been here you’ve been exactly that.”

“But the parish, they’ll all know,” said Father Juan.

“Sure they will. Many of them already do. I know most of the Spanish speaking ones do.”

“You do?”

“Emily and I hear what they say about you,” the senior priest continued, “when you’re not looking. My Spanish isn’t that bad. We also see how they respect you. I don’t particularly care if they believe some superstitious mumbo-jumbo about the priests in my parish. There’s more than one way to skin a cat, as my father used to say, and I’m not interested in trying to force someone else into one narrow doctrine. What I care about is if the parishioners trust you; if they will go to you; if they will confess to you. All I really care is if you can minister to their needs. And you do. In spades. Everything else, to my mind, is

just useless work, hand-waving.

Father Juan looked up at the senior priest and then at Emily. He folded up the paper and set it down on the counter lightly, as if it were delicate. Then he took a few steps, sat down in a nearby chair and folded his long legs under the seat. "Sorry," he said. "I needed to sit down."

The senior priest chuckled in sympathy. "No doubt you did son." he said. "This must be quite a shock for you."

"Not really," said Father Juan dejectedly. "I've been through this part many times before. I was just hoping that this time..."

The priest trailed off.

"Exactly," said Father Jacob. "You were hoping that this time would be different. Well it is. I don't know about how other parishes run things but here if you are a help, then you're part of the team. And that's the way I do things."

Father Juan let out a huge sigh. "Thank you father," he said. "Thank you."

The senior priest grabbed his gloves and tapped Father Juan on the shoulder as he passed, coffee mug in hand.

"Think nothing of it, son," he said as he walked over to his tools. "Besides, I'm sure this will all blow over soon."

"Do you really think so?" asked Father Juan.

"Sure," the senior priest said. "The people at Holy Family have come to know you and to trust you, as have I. I don't think for a moment their trust is so easily sold."

"Now if you will excuse me," the senior priest continued, "I have a well to attend to."

Father Juan looked up, a bit confused. "Excuse me Father Jacob. Did you say a well?"

"Yes," the senior priest said. "The Johnson's well stopped running last night, so I'm going over to take a look."

"But father," the junior priest said, "that's impossible."

## Chapter 46

The rain didn't start until almost noon. By that time Father Jacob had made it back to the parish and reported that the Johnson's well was in perfect shape. In perfect shape, that is, except for the small fact that it had no water. Father Juan took this news like a blow to the stomach. His one hope after the disastrous meeting he had with Alvarez was that somehow the mystery of the town's wells going dry would die with the man. That was, after all, the reason why he angrily went to see him in the first place. Now that he had proof that Alvarez had nothing to do with the drought, it made him feel doubly guilty for the man's death.

Because the Swiftettes had a playoff game that afternoon in Panhandle, Father Jacob kicked Emily and Father Juan out, telling them to go enjoy the game. The entire way there, Father Juan watched the windshield wipers flip back and forth on his old truck, feeling a growing weight of despair as the wet asphalt stretched ahead like a dark black snake. When he got to the game, the sun popped its face out of the clouds, warming the ground where he parked and brightening his mood appreciably. Inside, the game was just starting and the Swiftettes were thrilled to see their unofficial mascot in the stands loudly cheering for them. The news about him must not have reached them yet, he thought darkly, or they wouldn't be so happy to see him. In spite of his dark thoughts, he found he enjoyed the game immensely. The girls played terrifically and had the game locked up not too long into the second half. The regional quarter finals would be next, probably against Groom. They were a good team but Father Juan didn't think the game next Tuesday would be all that difficult for the Swiftettes. It was the following weekend finals in Levelland that worried him. Whoever made it there would be just as good as the girls. Maybe better.

The boys' team, the Swifts, did well, winning their game by almost as large a margin as the Swiftettes. Coach Doyle looked happy but still would not look at Father Juan or acknowledge his existence. The priest had purposefully chosen not to sit next to Emily in hope that he might have a better chance of reconnecting with his friend. He felt sad to sit there and not be able to congratulate him afterwards but he didn't want to intrude when the coach had more important things on his mind. Besides, he consoled himself, no matter what, basketball season would be over soon. Then they would have plenty of time to patch things up together later.

*(Sunday 2/20)*

That Sunday, Father Juan came to church worried about how the parish would respond. By the time the morning mass was over, he realized he had worried needlessly. He had heard several groups of people whispering when he was around but most of the congregation was respectful. Mrs. Keim even came up to him and put her arm around him. She didn't say a word, she didn't need to. This, more than anything else, steadied Father Juan. The local paper was apparently happy with just the one report and the rest of the news world was too busy with major turf war in Congress to take note of a minor priest in a back-water town.

The following week brought a relaxing change to Father Juan. He caught up on chores around his place, like giving his shower a thorough once over and found some extra time to shoot hoop with Mali after school. Both the Swifts and the Swiftettes won their games on Tuesday and advanced to the regional finals that coming weekend in Levelland. The rains had tailed off for a brief reprieve and though not especially toasty, Father Juan found the thin bluish winter sunlight still warmed his heart.

Not everything was going well, however. That Tuesday at the game, Father Juan found out from Emily that Alvarez Trucking was going to close its doors the next day. This came as a bit of a shock to the priest as he assumed the company was well funded. He was not the only one surprised. As it turned out Antonio had tied up many of his assets into an investment which ended up going bad, or so Emily was told.

"What's going to happen to Paul then," Father Juan asked? "I know he was Antonio's right hand. This must be a complete shock to him."

Emily smiled back at Father Juan in a funny way. The two were seated next to each other in the stands waiting for the second half of Swiftettes' game to start. "That's the funny thing. Paul is almost excited. I've never seen him so happy. I even caught him whistling the other day."

"Paul?" replied the priest about the normally taciturn coach. "Whistling?"

"Yeah, I know. It's crazy sounding but it's true. I saw it."

"But why would he be happy about losing his job. That doesn't make sense."

"Well," said Emily. "He never was really happy working there. He would never say anything in public but he used to complain all the time about how wasteful it was – how much money Alvarez was throwing away. He'd been looking for

another job for a while and finally got an offer a few weeks ago. He was still trying to think up a way to tell Alvarez when he died and suddenly didn't need to."

"Well I'm glad to hear he's doing well," Father Juan said, wanting to end the subject. He could still not talk about Antonio's death without feeling uncomfortable.

Sensing this, Emily placed her hand on his upper arm and caressed it gently. "Still hurts?" she asked.

He nodded, not trusting his voice to answer.

"You know it's not your fault, right?"

"Yes," he said. "I do know. But sometimes knowing is not the same as feeling. Know what I mean?"

"Don't I," she said as she gave his bicep a squeeze. "Say," she asked, tone suddenly getting serious, "can I ask you something? Something important?"

Father Juan turned to look her in the eye. "You know you can," he said. "What's up?"

"It's Paul. The new job is some kind of real estate deal. I don't know what but he says it'll bring in a whole lot more money. Enough, he says, that he can raise a family."

Father Juan raised an eyebrow. "Is that what it sounds like," he asked?

"You mean, did he propose to me?" she said.

"Yes. Did he, cause that sure sounds like it?"

"Not in so many words," Emily said as she again put her arm on him, "but it was clearly the direction he was going. He was talking about buying a house, a big one. Big enough, he said, for all of us."

"Well that's great," said the priest, "isn't it?"

"Well..." Emily started.

"What?" said Father Juan. He took her hands in his and held them still. He had never seen the normally comfortable Emily at such a loss for words. He noticed how tired she looked. The hint of dark lines settled under her eyes and he could see glossiness in her glance that reminded him of long nights, tossing and turning. He wanted to ask her if she was getting enough sleep lately but he knew the answer to that. He could read it on her face. Instead he said, "This is what you want, isn't it?"

“Yes,” she said in frustration, “It is what I want, it’s just not...”

“Not what?” said Father Juan, after a pause.

“That’s the thing. I don’t know,” she said in frustration, giving his hands a squeeze and then letting them go. “I don’t know what to think. I like Paul and I can definitely see a future with him, only I just...”

“Just...” the priest asked.

“Just,” Emily said and then the referee blew his whistle. Father Juan and Emily looked over, startled. The teams were clearing the floor preparing for the game to start. They had missed the warm up engrossed as they were in their conversation.

“Look,” he said. “You’re tired. I can see that. Why don’t you take your time and think on this some more?”

“Sure,” she said. “That’s some good advice. I’ll think on it and tell you later,” she said as she gave his hand another squeeze.

“Sure,” he said, “That sounds great.”

Halftime ended with a whistle blow and soon in the excitement of the game, their conversation was forgotten.

Later that evening, while saying his prayers, Father Juan remembered their conversation and said a special prayer for Emily; that she would find peace with whatever it was that was bothering her.

That night he dreamed of her again. She was nude, smiling, holding a rose in her hands while looking out to the sky. She was on a green field of flat low grass which felt soft and spongy under his feet. Raised lines radiated out from where she stood and though the pattern they made looked more like a star than anything else, he knew them to be a free-throw line. The logic of dreams being what they were, he somehow knew she was part way through a three shot penalty, sinking the first shot with two more to go. She held the rose in both her hands and concentrated in tight focus, mentally preparing to take her next shot. Only it wasn’t a basket she was looking at but a golden sun low on the horizon. The glow from the sun was bright everywhere, like the lights on the floor of a stadium but the warm light cast harsh blue shadows which moved and writhed on the floor as if they were moving to some other faster time of their own then the people who cast them.

Father Juan woke up from this dream deeply disturbed. Not that Emily was nude, as that somehow felt normal, natural. He was upset because he was not sure whether the sun in his dream was setting or rising. For some reason this



struck him as terribly important but he could not for the life of him understand why.

The next day, as Emily had said, Alvarez Trucking closed its doors. The news shot through Nazareth like a bullet, ricocheting off one person and speeding to the next. While the rest of the country had been experiencing a healthy amount of rain, even floods in some spots, North Texas was in its third year of drought. Worse still, it was coming up on planting time. Planting time is a time when farmers need a chunk of money to pay for the seed they put into the ground. They must then husband their crops carefully through the many long months of no income until those seeds bring forth a crop that when harvested finally pays for a whole year's worth of work. It is a difficult time, a crucial time; a time in which a farmer must carefully guess which crop will do best and literally "bet the farm" on his hunch. It is a decision that takes guts, nerves of steel and a remarkable faith in a better future. It also takes money, lots of money. Many of the farmers who had driven for Alvarez, suddenly found they had to make these decisions at such a critical time with much less income. Father Juan likened it to blowing a loud air-horn right before a player must make a critical free throw, 1 point behind and only seconds on the clock.

In the midst of all this worry, the two basketball teams, the Swifts and the Swiftettes played ball like they had never played before. They charged into the regional finals in Levelland like champions. The Swiftettes soundly beat McLean High 74-65 to take the region 1 championship. The Swifts, however, did not do as well. They beat Petersburg High 68-65 on Saturday but lost to Happy Texas High on Sunday by 12 points. Practically the entire town showed up for both games on Sunday and their lustful cheering echoed loudly in the large stadium at South Plains College. Father Juan wasn't sure if it was the recent bad news in the town but it seemed to him that the residents clung to the two teams as if their victories alone were all that was needed to solve their problems. He knew in an intellectual sense that sport could build community and a cohesive spirit but he had never seen the effect so strongly. These farmers were not like the fans he found in the big cities. They cheered in the games and supported the two teams like the town itself had a stake in the game. The more he thought about it, the more he realized how true this was. These were not the type, he thought, that would go gentle into that good night. Quite the opposite, in fact.

## Chapter 47

For the Swiftettes, winning the region 1 championship brought a measure of happiness to the town but it also came with an equal serving of dread. They were now seeded in the state championship tournament, scheduled to take place the very next Friday down in Austin. The state capital was far enough that it required an extra travel day, just to get there. Worse still, it was too far to take school buses, so carpools had to be formed, as well as hotel reservations, chaperones, healthy meals, clean uniforms, and all kinds of other details a traveling team might need. Father Juan watched as Emily and Lupé Alvarez mobilized the team parents into groups, gave them each an impossible task and then helped them make it possible. All this took place as another cold front passed through the state, marking the end of February and the beginning of March. The lower temperatures made it difficult for Father Juan to run and duties at church seemed more demanding than ever, until the priest felt as if the entire town had been transferred into some Alice-in-Wonderland world of frenetic action and basketball lore. A sign set in front of a house at the end of the block captured the spirit perfectly. It said in large letters, “We Shall Overcome.” Father Juan agreed but didn’t quite know what it was they would overcome.

Thursday morning found the Swiftettes all packed up and secure in any of a dozen vehicles. Everyone had a place and a set of directions. Father Juan found himself driving an ancient minivan and wondered if he had been chosen for this vehicle because someone thought it might be marginally safer if driven by someone with an “inside track” to God. The van was old enough that he wasn’t sure if it would even make the eight hour trip. He carefully nursed the vehicle into the long line of cars, said a prayer for all of them and then headed down the road.

When the team first walked into Frank Erwin Center, they felt like small bugs on a very large plate. The room was massive and filled with teams from all over

the state and their supporters. A huge clash of uniforms and colors hit them like wandering into the inside of some giant anthill, full of basketball fans and teams. For those who had lived all their lives in a small town, the stadium was a shock. For the first time they were standing in a building that was quite literally big enough to comfortably cover most of their town. Father Juan was used to large places and had been to many Laker games so he knew exactly what to expect. When the lead parents stopped short by the sheer size of the room, he quietly walked to the front and began directing the students until their parents could come to terms with their surroundings. The very last person to enter was Emily who greeted him with a smile and asked, "Shell shock?"

Father Juan rolled his eyes. "Funny how people who are used to such wide open spaces can be stopped by a large building," he said. "Do you suppose it is some form of agoraphobia?"

Emily laughed. "Nope, I call it small town-it-us. Every time I see this I am reminded of the quote, 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' This room is much bigger than anything these people are used to."

"But not you," the priest asked?

"I went to school here," Emily said. "Might have stayed here too, if it wasn't for Lisa's father. I like large cities but my roots are elsewhere."

Thinking of their picnic in the graveyard, Father Juan smiled. "I guess so," he said.

He wondered what coach Doyle would say.

The Swiftettes faced their first team, Leggett High, the region 4 winners on the following Friday at 7:00. That same day there was another Conference 1A-Division 2 playoff at 2:00 between the powerful region 2 winners, Turkey Valley and the ever present region 3 victors Neches High. If the Swiftettes won their game later that evening, they would be playing the winner of this game. The entire team sat close and watched carefully. Turkey Valley and Neches were good, very good. The girls took notes along with the coach and half the parents. By the time Neches defeated Turkey Valley in a very tight 60-53, the Swiftettes were scared. They saw some of the best playing they would ever witness on a high school level and they were pretty sure they were not up to the challenge. Fortunately for the girls, their parents felt differently.

Right after the game, the Swiftettes' coach took the girls out for a run on the local track to get their mind off the game. The bright sunshine and exercise helped them forget Neches High and focus on the coming game with Leggett High. They warmed up in the college's practice room with mostly passing and shooting drills. The coach brought them in for a last minute pep talk and then right at 20 minutes to 7:00 led the girls out into the stadium. The coach kept the girls busy with light drills to keep their minds off how large the room was or how big the crowd. The team captains, Lisa and Jade, or Salt and Pepper as they were called, made the call and won the coin toss. They chose a side, took their places and the game was on.

One hour and 45 minutes later, the Swiftettes were victorious with a 66-63 win. The team was elated but the long drive and the days events took their toll on them all the same. After a pizza party, they returned to their hotel and crashed.

The next morning the girls woke early and were full of energy. Emily and Father Juan made a donut run to give them something to chew on while the adults got their coffee. A light rain started falling but the sky remained open and the storm had little energy. The girls took turns napping, eating and watching the tournament. Father Juan was impressed at how much food the girls could put down and still remain thin. Their coach gave them an early dinner to load them up on carbs and then had them doing light drills again in the practice room. Their coach knew enough not to give them too long of a pep talk. The girls were already high strung enough, they didn't need to sit for any length of time.

As with their game the day before, 20 minutes before the game, the coach led them out to the stadium and kept them busy with more drills. At the last minute the coach called Father Juan out of the crowd and asked him to do a blessing. By then the Neches Tigers were gathered nearby in their green and white jerseys. He caught the eye of the Tigers coach and asked if she wanted her team to participate. She smiled at the offer and soon Father Juan found himself in the center of two teams divided by a game, yet heads bowed together in prayer.

By the time the priest had regained his seat, the coin had been tossed and the game was about to start. With a whistle and a toss the game was on.

The Swiftettes and the Tigers fought back and forth for most of an hour and a half with neither side gaining much advantage. Finally in the last 10 minutes, the Swiftettes started to pick up a few extra points. By the time the clock ran down, they had racked up 71 points to the Tigers 64. The whistle blew and just

like that they were the Division 2 State Champions.

They packed into their cars early on Sunday and pulled back into Nazareth tired but happy at around 4:00. Someone had changed the large sign out near the church. It now read, "We Have Overcome." Under it was a smaller sign that read, "Congratulations State Champions." All over town people had put out flags and banners. When they got to the church parking lot, a crowd was on hand to greet them. With hugs and shouts and cheers, the conquering Swiftettes were welcomed home.

That night a very tired but happy Father Juan entered the church for the evening Mass. Most of the team was there, including Emily and Lupé Alvarez. Coach Doyle was there as well, looking more relaxed than Father Juan had seen him in a while. Maybe the stress of coaching was getting to Paul, he thought, as he watched him talk to Father Jacob and some of the other team parents after the service. There seemed to be an unusually large group hanging around the back hall which made Father Juan wonder if something was up. Then he heard Father Jacob say he had an announcement to make.

When the room quieted down, the older priest said, "I want to congratulate the Swiftettes for their spectacular performance this season." This drew a healthy level of applause. When it died down he continued. "Their teamwork and dedication are an example to us all. I would also like to thank all the many parent volunteers or 'team parents' as they are called, for their selfless sacrifice of both time and money which allowed the Swiftettes to attain the success they did." This brought another round of applause. When it died down again he said, "I would now like to let coach Doyle say a few words. I understand he has an announcement to share with us all." With that the senior priest turned to coach Doyle and the room went quiet.

"Thank you Father," Doyle said. "Like you mentioned, a big congratulations go to the Swiftettes and their championship season. I also wish to publicly congratulate my Swifts' basketball team for their spectacular season as well. They did not take the state but they did very well in Division 2 and that is a wonderful thing."

There was a smattering of applause. Paul waited until it stopped to continue.

"As most of you know, I have been the Swifts basketball coach here for the past 3 years. Coaching these young men has been a great honor and a real privilege for me. But the time has come for me to move on, so to speak, and so effective immediately, I am tending my resignation as coach."

There were a few shocked gasps and someone even shouted out, "No!" Paul

held up his hand to quiet the crowd.

“I appreciate your concern and I want you to know this is a choice I have been thinking about for a while and one I think will prove to be a benefit for all. You see a job offer came in for me not long after Alvarez Trucking closed and it was an offer I could not refuse. I’ll still be living in this wonderful community, still be active in local sports and here at the parish. I just will no longer be ‘coach’ Doyle, just plain old Mr. Doyle.

Some general laughter followed this last part.

“Which brings me,” Doyle said, “to another part. I have been living in the community for some time and come to think of it as my own. But I have been doing so as a bachelor and while I enjoy living alone, I think it is high time I moved up in the world, and got hitched, which is why I am announcing my engagement to the lovely Miss Emily Hoffman.”

This brought shouts of surprise and congratulations. Everyone started talking at once, patting Paul on the back or giving hugs to Emily. Only Father Juan had noticed Emily’s face right when Paul made his announcement and the look he saw when Paul mentioned their engagement was anything but happy.

## Chapter 48

*(Sunday night, 3/6 at home)*

That night, Father Juan walked home from the church and slumped into his chair, too tired to sleep. He could feel a gray blanket of exhaustion covering his head, his thoughts and it made him feel thick and surly.

The Lakers had played an afternoon game that same day down in San Antonio against the Spurs. He had set up his TV to record the game before he left for Austin, which felt like a year ago, even though it was only a couple of days. The irony that he had just been in the area and yet had to drive all the way home to watch the game was not lost on him. Some things, he thought, could not be changed.

Something about the game kept bugging him. Normally he liked the drama to unfold at it’s own pace, the mystery of not knowing what would happen next, even if he was watching a game that had taken place a week ago. But for some

reason this game was boring him. He kept fast forwarding it, trying to find the “good part” but it never came. He felt a growing unease of hunger in his belly but was too tired to get out of his chair to scrounge through his cupboard. He kept jabbing the fast forward button on his remote so hard that he thought he might break it. Finally in a fit of despair, he shut off the TV, and tossed the remote across the room. There was 10 minutes left to go in the game, and he didn’t even care.

The next morning he woke up with a sore throat and a runny nose. He checked his temperature, saw he was running a slight fever, so he took some aspirin and crawled back in bed.

About 10:00 the phone rang and woke him up. He slowly trundled across the room, feeling like his head was wrapped in cotton. “Hello,” he said in a slurred voice.

“Hey sleepyhead, what ‘cha doing in bed?” said a cheerful voice. It was Emily.

“Oh, hi, I’ve got a cold and feel like crap.”

“Oh,” she said. “I thought your voice sounded funny. Do you need anything? Want me to drop by with some food or medicine?”

“No,” he mumbled.

“What’s that?”

“No,” he said, the sickness making his words jumble together. “I’m fine. A little bit more sleep and I’ll be fine. Okay or fine. Fine.”

“Poor thing,” Emily said with genuine sympathy. “Should I call you this afternoon, do you think?”

“Uh, sure. I don’t know. I’m just, just... I’ll be okay. Really. I’m just going to bed now.”

He hung up before she could say good bye and stumbled back into bed.

Five minutes later the phone rang again. Father Juan had just drifted off to sleep and being woken again angered him.

“What is it,” he said jerking up the phone?

“Mijo?” said the voice on the other side. “Is that you?”

It was Señor Pérez, his uncle.

“Hola, Tio,” he said in a more friendly tone. “I’m sorry to be so rude.”

“You don’t sound so good Mijo. Are you okay?”

“I’m sick Tio. A cold, nothing serious. I’m just spending a day in bed, that’s all.”

“Hmm,” said his uncle. “Are you sure?”

“Si, Tio. Veridad.”

“Well... Your Tia wanted me to call you to let you know she’s okay.”

“Okay?” This woke up Father Juan instantly. Patty Pérez never mentioned when she was sick. She was just not that kind of person. “What’s wrong Tio?”

“Nothing, she’s in the hospital for some kind of procedure...”

“Hospital,” said Father Juan? “She’s in the hospital?” Father Juan looked at the clock on the wall and wondered when he could catch the next flight out of Amarillo.

“Si,” his uncle said. “But she’s only there for today. It's one of those patient things.”

“Out patient,” suggested Father Juan?

“Si, out patient,” the old man said. “She’s supposed to be home tonight.”

“What’s she doing there?”

“Didn’t she tell you,” asked his uncle. “She’s got cancer.”

*(Wednesday, 3/9)*

Father Juan woke up early in the morning. He looked at the clock, saw it was 5:30 and realized at the same time he was wide awake. For the first time in days he felt clear-headed and healthy. He climbed out of bed only to find he was a bit woozy and weakened from his cold. “No running today,” he said to himself as he struggled into the small kitchen and got his coffee going.

The view out his window showed the sun just about to rise. Small stretched clouds scattered across the sky, their edges made pale by the approaching light. Orange and red bands of color ringed the eastern horizon, as if to welcome the day. Taking this as a heavenly sign, Father Juan smiled and started



cleaning up his kitchen.

An hour later he had the small apartment cleaned up, had taken a shower and found himself outside his place looking at the small shrine to Santa Muerte. He tidied up the candles, noting that the strange red one was gone. When he was done, he got down on his knees and prayed to Saint Death.

“Dear Mother,” he said in Spanish. “I don’t know how to pray to you, or what to say, but a dear friend of mine is hurting and in poor health. I ask you to help her, to comfort her and to protect her soul, as she means everything in this world to me. I believe you will know her as she has never done anything but nice things for others and has been like a mother to me. Surely she is a saint, like yourself, only maybe not as powerful.”

“I thank you mother for your generous gifts. May you smile down on us from your home in heaven... Amen.”

Father Juan got back to his feet feeling good about praying for his Tia. He didn’t quite know what to think about Santa Muerte but he was sure it would do no harm to pray to her for someone else. He walked back up the stairs to his room, got his things and started off for Holy Family. It was Ash Wednesday today, a very busy day for Catholic churches everywhere and he wanted to be there to help Father Jacob.

## Chapter 49

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent on the Catholic calendar. Lent is a time of reflection and redirection; the period between despair and redemption. The time when a believer must confront the glory of God’s redemption and its very real cost. It is a time of fasting and prayer, to prepare believers for God’s sacrifice and his rebirth as celebrated on Easter.

The day is marked by a Mass where believers can receive a smudge of ash on their foreheads. The ash is there as a sign of mourning, to remind the believer of their sins. It also symbolizes their eventual death, that one day we will all be ashes.

At Holy Family, Father Jacob liked to have three different Masses – early in the morning (before work), at noon and in the late evening so all the

parishioners could fit it into their schedule. Father Juan walked up to the parish just in time to help with the morning mass. Already there were people lined up at the door into the back hall. He greeted them warmly, received a group hug from Lisa and Jade and opened the back door to let them in. Father Jacob already got the large coffee machine working and Emily had just set out a tray with styrofoam cups, cream and sugar. Seeing that the lights were already on in the sanctuary, Father Juan dropped on his coat and helped the older priest light the rest of the candles on the main altar and on the side altar. Then they got out the ashes already prepared by Father Jacob from last Palm Sunday's palms and started "ashing" the people in line.

After the morning Mass, almost everyone went about their day. Lisa, Jade and a few others stayed behind and shared a box of donuts with Father Juan in the parish kitchen. The girls were their usual energetic selves which Father Juan found oddly calming this morning. As if being around someone more lively than normal was the proper cure after you've been sick. The girls were chatting away happily and then suddenly stopped, looked around and then at each other out of the corners of their eyes. From the canary eating grins on their faces, he could tell they had reached some kind of an unspoken agreement. Father Juan didn't know if it was telepathy or if the two girls just had some unusual way of communicating but he found these two sometimes spooky. When he first met these two they had jokingly called themselves the "evil twins." Now he knew why.

"We need to talk," said Lisa.

"Yes," said Jade. "Talk."

That was when Father Juan noticed that there was no one else in the room but himself and the two girls. Father Jacob had run off to deal with another dry well and Emily must be in the parish office. Everyone else was gone.

Father Juan looked at the clock on the wall. It was 9:28. "Shouldn't you be in school," he asked? The girls looked at each other out of the corner of their eyes and then back at him. Again he got the feeling something had passed between them but he didn't know what.

"You disappoint us, Father," Lisa said looking at him intensely.

"We thought you were smarter than that," finished Jade.

"What," asked Father Juan, feeling lost?

"We don't have class first period," Lisa said dryly.

"And we don't need to be there for second period," Jade added. "We already

checked.”

“Oh,” Father Juan said looking down at his mug. “You’re right. I should have guessed.”

They looked at each other again with just their eyes moving. Their faces remained directed straight at the priest, this time with just the hint of a smile.

“Well you two obviously went to a lot of trouble to set this up,” Father Juan said, “what is it you want?”

“It's my mother,” said Lisa. “Her engagement.”

“Yah,” said Jade, “her engagement.”

“What about it,” asked the priest?

“We don’t think...” Lisa said.

“She should marry coach Doyle,” Jade finished.

Father Juan sat for a moment and thought. “Hmm, okay,” he said. “Why not?”

Again the girls did their look. He could see emotions playing across their faces as they thought.

“Three reasons,” said Jade.

“One,” said Lisa holding up a finger, “because he is not that good for her.”

“And two,” said Jade holding up two fingers, “because he is not what he seems.”

Father Juan sat there and stared at the two girls across the table from him. He honestly did not know what to say to them. His first impulse was to blow them off, to ignore what they had to say. But that was not very smart, as they would happily tell him. And they would be right.

“You do know,” he asked the girls, “you’re talking about my friend?”

“Is he,” Lisa shot back?

This stopped Father Juan cold. Was Paul his friend? He thought about it for a second and then realized it didn’t matter in the context of Emily’s engagement.

“That’s neither here nor there,” he said. “What’s important is whether or not Paul is a good match for Emily. Am I right?”

The girls nodded their heads in unison.

“Good. So why do you think he’s not?”

“Isn’t it obvious,” asked Lisa?

“Don’t you see it,” asked Jade?

“Apparently not,” said Father Juan.

“He doesn’t make her happy,” said Lisa.

“He doesn’t even want her to play basketball,” Jade practically spit. The girls both shivered theatrically as if this was the worst thing they could imagine.

“Really,” the priest asked with genuine surprise? “He doesn’t want her to play basketball?”

“He told her so last night,” said Lisa.

“Right after he drove us home,” said Jade.

“He said, ‘I think it’s time we let the girls play ball,’” said Lisa imitating Paul’s sober tone.

““While we do more adult things,”” said Jade.

“Wow,” said Father Juan, surprised. “He really said that?”

The girls both nodded firmly.

“Wow,” he continued, lost in thought. Then an idea hit him. “I appreciate your concern for Emily but why are you telling me this? I mean wouldn’t it be better if you told her this directly?”

“That leads us to reason number three,” said Lisa holding up three fingers.

“She’s not in love with him,” said Jade.

“She in love with someone else,” said Lisa.

Father Juan felt his eyebrows go up. “She is,” he asked? “With whom?”

“You,” the girls said in unison.

“What?” he said. Father Juan stood up, suddenly angry. “If this is a joke, it’s not very funny.”

The girls looked at each other again with that same look. They held it for a second, and then both sighed.

“It’s not...” said Lisa.

“A joke,” said Jade.

“Oh,” said Father Juan as he dropped to his seat. “I suppose it’s not.”

The three sat in silence for a few seconds. Father Juan lowered his head into

his hands and felt uncomfortably transparent, as if these two girls had just read his mind.

“Look,” said Jade quietly and with compassion.

“We know you love her,” continued Lisa.

“I do,” asked Father Juan?

“Sure,” said Lisa.

“It’s pretty obvious,” said Jade.

Father Juan looked up at the girls. They held his gaze steadily. Suddenly he realized they were right. It all made sense. No wonder he had been feeling so funny around her. He did love Emily.

“Okay,” he said quickly as if he spoke slowly he might talk himself out of it. “I guess I do love Emily. But what do you two expect me to do about it?”

“Isn’t it obvious,” said Lisa?

“Kick Paul out...” said Jade.

“And marry her instead,” finished Lisa.

The two girls sat across from Father Juan with smiles on their faces as if they had solved their mother’s problems so easily. These two, he thought to himself, are amazingly perceptive, but they sure are young.

“Look,” he said, putting on his father-knows-best voice, “It’s not that simple. For one thing, even if I love your mother, I cannot simply marry her.”

“You can’t,” said Lisa?

“Why not,” said Jade?

“Well for starters,” said Father Juan, “I’m a priest.”

The two girls stared at Father Juan blankly.

“A priest,” he continued. “The word means something.”

“So,” said the girls together?

“So? Look, it’s a vow. Think of it as a sacred promise. I said I would do something, in this case be married to the church and not to a woman. I cannot just go and break that vow. It would be... It would be...” He searched his head for a moment. “It would be like me being married to someone and then cheating on them, a kind of adultery. What would you think of that?”

Both girls screwed up their faces in disgust.

“You see, it’s that kind of thing. In fact, the two vows, marriage and celibacy, are exactly the same. What would you think of a man who could not keep his promises? Not too highly, I suspect.”

Both girls nodded again.

“So you see, I would have to break one promise to make another and that doesn’t even take into account how coach Doyle might feel about having a friend try to take away his fiance.”

“Yes, but he doesn’t act like your friend,” said Lisa.

“Yah,” said Jade.

“That may be true,” said Father Juan, “but that still doesn’t change my responsibility to him, does it? He may think of me as an enemy but he still is *my* friend and I don’t treat *my* friends like that. Nor, for that matter, do I respect anyone who does. Even if he is not a friend, it still is not right.”

The girls sat across from him looking deflated and small, possibly on the point of tears. Father Juan realized it took some guts to confront him like this and to suddenly have their plans dashed into pieces had to be unsettling. He felt a calming wave of compassion for their position come over him. The girls were wonderfully insightful, more than most adults but that insight was married to the wisdom of teen-aged girls. It was not their fault their solutions were not realistic. Given a few more years, they would know this; understand their limits but right now they were taking it personally.

The priest got up, walked around the table between the girls, got down on one knee and put an arm around their shoulders. This placed his head in between theirs. “Look,” he said softly. “I do love your mother... Emily I mean but I also respect her. She is an adult and can handle her problems anyway she likes. If I am going to love her, then I have to also respect her and that means respecting the choices she makes. If she wishes to marry Paul, then I have to respect that, regardless of how I feel. If she chooses not to, then I will also respect that. I cannot control what she does or whom she marries and I wouldn’t respect anyone who tries. Does that make sense?”

Both girls nodded, tears silently falling down their faces.

“Besides,” he continued, “what exactly can I offer her? I cannot marry her and I cannot go back on my vow. To do so would be to ruin all that I hold dear and have worked so hard to maintain. It would make a mockery of the ministry God has given me. I cannot do that and I cannot believe for a minute that Emily would expect me to. Does that make sense?”

Both girls nodded again. Father Juan reached over and plucked two tissues from the box on the kitchen table and handed one to each girl. In doing so he looked up and saw Emily silently standing in the door way. When she noticed he was looking at her she quietly moved back into the sanctuary while the girls blew their noses. Father Juan gave each of the girls a hug and escorted them to the back door of the hall. He waved as they walked away, arm in arm, all smiles and sadness, then he closed the door.

“How much did you hear,” he asked?

Emily was standing in the shadow of the door where she would be unnoticed. “All of it,” she said. “Everything.”

“Did the girls know you were there?”

“No.” she said looking thoughtful. “Not to my knowledge. I don’t think they... they would have said what they did if they knew I was listening. But it's hard to tell with those two. They are sharp enough to set up something like that. But in this case, I don’t think so.”

Father Juan nodded his head. “I agree,” he said.

## Chapter 50

“So,” said Father Juan. “What are we going to do?”

“What are we going to do?” said Emily.

The two were back in the church office, Emily at her desk, Father Juan across from her on the little stool that he pulled out of his office.

“Is it true,” she asked?

“Is what true,” Father Juan responded but he knew exactly what she meant.

“Do you love me,” she asked?

“Yes,” he said. “I do.”

She paused for a second. “When did you discover this?” she asked.

“Just now, today, in fact. Although I guess I’ve known it for a while.”

“You have?”

“Well my aunt told me several months back.”

“She did?”

“Yes, but I didn’t believe her.”

“You didn’t?” Emily asked. “Why not?”

Father Juan let out a big sigh. “I guess,” he said, “because I didn’t want to.”

“Too proud to say you loved me,” she said as if she had been hurt by his admission.

Father Juan reached over and held her hands in his. It felt electric, exciting to hold them. He didn’t know if he wanted to hug her, love her or to run from the room. “It’s not pride,” he said. “It could never be that. But being in love with you could... does bring up a whole can of worms and frankly most of the ways to deal with situations like this involve separation. If there is anything I want right now, it is *not* to be separated from you. Not that.”

“Then what about what I want,” she asked.

“What do you want?”

“I... I don’t know,” she said looking down. “At least I think I don’t.”

“Bullshit,” he said.

“What?” Emily looked up in surprise.

“You heard me,” Father Juan said carefully. “I said bullshit.”

Emily’s face reddened.

“Look,” he said. “It’s very clear. You wish to be loved. The only question is by whom. Only that’s not really a question is it?”

She looked at him and then shook her head. “I guess not,” she said in resignation.

“No,” he said, “it’s not. I cannot love you, at least not in the way a man and a woman love each other. Nor can I expect you to be satisfied what little love I can give you. I have a wife. I am married, in a very real sense, to the church. Moreover, you know that. And though I don’t know it for sure, I suspect you would not want me to break my vow to the church for anyone, least of all yourself. Am I right?”

“Yes,” Emily said. “You’re right... but?”

“But, what?”

“But... Oh damn it all! Why do I have to fall in love with the one guy who is



the least available?”

“Because you’re cursed, like me,” he said with a smile.

“It’s not funny,” she said.

“Who said I was joking?”

They sat there and looked at each other, neither saying much or wanting to say much.

“Look,” he said interrupting the silence. “There’s something else I’ve been wanting to tell you.”

She looked up as a tear rolled down her cheek. “What is it,” she said woodenly?

“It’s about Antonio. About that night. Something I’ve been wanting to tell you for a while but was too afraid to. Can I tell you now?”

She shook her shoulders in resignation. “Why not?”

“There’s something I haven’t told anyone else about that night. Not even Lupé, although I suspect she knows.”

“Knows what?”

“I’ll get to that. That night, when I got to the warehouse it was dark, very dark. I had come in the front door but couldn’t see a thing inside. I had stupidly left my flashlight at home but I found I could see a little if I propped the door open, letting the porch light shine in. So I started to look around for pipes or something, hoping my eyes would adjust. The long tables were covered in some kind of bags but in the dark I could not tell. When I got to the back I found a small room near the wall. It had a doorway to a stairwell, only I couldn’t see that in the dark. All I saw was this owl thingy; this small statue or something, about this tall.” Father Juan held his fingers about 4 inches apart. “It was all black with weird glowing eyes, red LED’s or something, like on the front of a computer.”

“Here,” Father Juan said reaching into his collar, “It looked like this, only bigger.” He pulled out a chain that he was wearing around his neck from under his shirt. He lifted the chain over his head and handed it to her. Hanging from it was a pendant like a large charm on a charm bracelet. It was a small figure of an owl, only a few inches tall and all black. “See the eyes,” he said. The owl had two shiny red eyes that held a slight glow as if lit from within. “See how they glow? Well the one in the warehouse was maybe twice as large and the eyes were much brighter.”

Emily looked at the pendant closely and then handed it back to Father Juan.

“That’s when Alvarez came in. He was on the phone talking with someone. Upset. I was trapped. There was only one door in and he was standing near it. I tried sneaking up to the door, hoping he might go outside so I could escape. When I got about half way there, he turned on the lights and saw me.”

Emily’s eyes were starting to turn glassy. She was about to cry. Father Juan could feel his emotions starting to build too. He swallowed hard and continued.

“You pretty much knew all this or guessed this, right?”

Emily nodded her head.

“Here’s what I didn’t tell you. The tables, the long ones going from the front to the back, the packing tables were covered in bags – bags of cocaine – hundreds of them.”

Emily’s eyes got big. “No,” she said as his words slowly sink in. “That cannot be!”

Father Juan stared at her, waiting.

“But he would never do that,” she said louder. “He was done with drugs. He said so.” By this point she was practically yelling.

“I know,” said Father Juan quietly, almost in a whisper.

His response calmed her, let her think. She paused for a second, her eyes searching him furiously. “But that doesn’t makes sense,” she said. “How did the drugs get there? What was he doing with them?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t say, believe it or not. All he said was that he had decided to do one last shipment for a friend but he never told me who or why. I got the feeling he was pushed into it based on the phone call I overheard. Incidentally, that’s how his phone got broken.”

“His phone?”

“Yeah, he threw it against the wall in disgust. Someone was supposed to pick up the drugs that night from what I could gather. That was why he was there. Only they didn’t show and he was stuck.”

“So he threw his phone?”

“Yep. Smashed it against the wall, pretty good too.”

“Hmm,” she said. “I could see him getting that mad but what about the drugs? You said there were bags of them on the sorting tables...”

“Lots and lots of them – cocaine.”

“Lots?”

“Yes, lots, as in thousands of pounds of it. Tons of it. That kind of lots.”

“Ooh!”

“Yes,” he said. “Ooh.”

“...But it wasn’t there when we got there. Where did this thousands of pounds of cocaine go? Did it just disappear?”

“Nope. It went underground,” he said.

“Underground?”

“Yep,” he said. “Underground as in under the ground.”

Emily looked blankly at Father Juan for a moment then her eyes moved in recognition. “The door! The one with the owl!”

“That’s right,” he said. “That doorway is a cover over a small stairwell leading to a basement under the warehouse. Down below was a room; a room that happens to be just big enough to store a ton or two of pre-packaged cocaine.”

“And the owl,” he continued pointing to the small lump under his shirt that hid the charm, “is the key. Near as I can tell, the only key. You just hold it up like this,” he mimicked holding the charm in his hand, waving in back and forth, “In front of the other owl and the door unlocks, just like that.”

Emily looked at him for a moment. “So you let Antonio hide his drugs down there?” Father Juan could tell she was having trouble with the logic of this.

“No. I hid them there myself,” he said.

“Didn’t he...”

“No. He was in no shape to move anything. The confession left him weak and tired – like his heart had given up. It does that sometimes. I don’t think he could have walked to the front door, let alone down the stairs and back.”

“So *you* hid his drugs,” she asked?

“Yes. Who else? We only had a little bit of time and there was no telling who might show up.”

“Yes,” she said. “But... But why? Why would you do that? You know it is a crime, right?”

“Oh yes,” he said heavily.

“But then why do it? Antonio was already guilty of many, many crimes. Why not let him die with one more.”

“Because...,” said Father Juan. “Because, he didn’t deserve it. It wasn’t fair.

Oh, he was guilty of a lot of things alright. More than you want to know, I can assure you. But he wasn't guilty of *this* crime. I was certain of it. It was bad enough that I killed him, as my being there surly killed him. I simply couldn't let him die with one more crime on his hands, especially after he worked so hard to no longer be a criminal; to make up for all the bad things he had done. It just wasn't right. It... It..."

"You hid his drugs because you felt sorry for him," Emily asked?

"No," said Father Juan. "I hid his drugs because he was my friend and he needed a friend right then. More than anything else, he just needed a friend."

The couple sat in the church office in silence. Daylight fell into the room from a window and Father Juan could see the small bits of dust dance in the light. He was slumped on his stool, facing the window but not looking at anything but dust. Emily sat in her chair, head supported by her hands, elbows on her desk. She was staring down at a pile of paperwork, eyes fixed, saying nothing. The clock on the wall ticked, ticked, ticked away the time.

Suddenly Emily stood up. "I... I need to do something. Get a cup of coffee," she said nervously.

"I'll go with you," Father Juan replied as he followed her out the door.

The sanctuary was still empty as they made their way through it and into the kitchen. Emily walked with her back stiff, her face carefully away from the priest.

Suddenly she turned on him near the coffee pot. "I don't understand," she demanded angrily. "Why did you tell me this? Why now? What is this all about?"

"I'm... because..." he said, surprised at her outburst. "I, I thought you needed to know."

"Know what," she spit out?

"I thought you needed to know," he said slowly, "so you could think, know what kind of man you fell in love with."

"But why are you telling me this now," she yelled? "Are you trying to make me mad, drive me away?"

"No," Father Juan said feeling a knot grow in his stomach. Emily was angry and he couldn't blame her. "I was just," he said. "Just..." He felt an itching, a need to move, to be active; to be somewhere other than where he was. "I'm sorry," he said as he walked out of the church and into the cool of the morning. "I'm so sorry."

## Chapter 51

*(Thursday, 3/17, Feast of St. Patrick)*

For over a week Father Juan said or did nothing but work or sleep. He stumbled through his day, making the motions of working but could not find the heart to care. He spoke very little to Emily, talking to her only about church business and even then only when necessary. She came to work looking tired with eyes rimmed red. He knew she must not be getting enough sleep but felt as if there was nothing he could do. As if he cared for her just a little bit more, it would be too much and he would crumble.

Father Jacob must have noticed the chill between the two workers but he was either too busy or too wise to intervene. For this Father Juan was grateful. He didn't know what he would do if he had to tell the senior father the truth and he knew he could not lie to the man. Saying nothing saved him for a while. It gave him plenty of time to pray and to think. What he mostly prayed about was Emily and for God to show him a way out of this situation. What he mostly thought about was how he had betrayed the church and his vow. The owl shaped key weighed heavy on his mind. The owl hung from his neck like a lump of lead, pulling his thoughts down and down. One of these days he knew he had to do something about the drugs but he didn't know how or when. He prayed for guidance, help, anything, anything, dear God, anything.

Finally on a Thursday, Mali came over after school and knocked on his door. The boy stood there in his shorts, holding a ball under one arm and said nothing. It was after dinner but it was still light enough for a few games. Father Juan wordlessly changed into his work-out clothes and followed the sound of the boy dribbling on the dirt court. Just before he left he dropped the chain with the little owl on his table.

For a half hour they warmed up and then played, shooting hard, playing rough. Mali had something at school that was bothering him and it showed in his play. That suited Father Juan's mood just fine.

They had just finished their third one-on-one game and were starting to really break out a sweat when the sheriff arrived. Four cars turned into the driveway almost at once, and slammed to a halt in the middle of their game. Father Juan

was quickly hand-cuffed and they sat him down heavily. A deputy stood over him and read him his Miranda rights. Sheriff Johnson walked up and was polite as he took the time to show him a search warrant while six of seven deputies charged up the stairs. Mali stood there stunned not knowing what to do. Eventually his mother came out the back door of her place and called him inside. He left, still starring at the hand-cuffed priest, looking as if he wanted to do something for him but didn't know what.

After about an hour of patient waiting, Father Juan started to get cold. The sweat had long since evaporated from his back and arms and the cool evening was making him uncomfortable in just his shorts and a t-shirt. Finally the deputies all walked out, some carrying a few of his belongs in plastic bags. The deputy watching over him uncuffed his wrists and helped the priest to stand. Stiff legged from sitting all that time, Father Juan stiff-walked up to his apartment and stared at the mess from the doorway. It looked like everything he owned had been turned over and dumped in the room. He could see photos yanked from the walls, in some cases with broken frames. Even the kitchen dishes and pots were piled in the mess, the occasional broken dish sticking out here and there. With a sigh of thankfulness that he didn't own much or that he wasn't also spending the night in jail, Father Juan got down on his knees and began the long job of getting his place in order again.

He didn't know what the sheriff was looking for but he could guess and that meant someone had betrayed him. Unfortunately, there was only one person he could think of that knew about the key and the drugs – Emily. He didn't blame her, after all he *had* committed a crime and he most certainly did not have to foolishly tell her about it. Moreover, he was a priest who had carnal love for a woman. He knew flouting God's law would carry a price and he was sure he would be paying it. Though he had tangled with law many times and been arrested at least a dozen of them, he could not remember ever feeling so sad. His only hope was that Emily was spared most of this pain.

And of the little owl on the chain? It was no where to be seen.

## Chapter 52

*(Friday, 3/25, The Annunciation of our Lord)*

A little over a week from the day the sheriff came and searched his house, Father Juan got a phone call. He was at the parish finishing up on some Friday paperwork when he heard the office phone ring. Emily had taken the afternoon off to go shopping with Lisa down in Plainview and Father Jacob was back at the parsonage preparing for that night's Mass so he got up from his stool and answered the phone.

"Holy Family Catholic Parish," he said. "How can I help you?"

"Mijo?" asked a confused voice on the other end. It was his uncle.

"Hola, Tio," Father Juan said. "¿Como esta?"

"Oh Mijo," his uncle blurted out in tears. "Oh Mijo. She is gone, she is gone. You're tia has left us."

Father Juan dropped the phone on the table and felt the world falling out from underneath him.

## Chapter 53

*(Sunday, 3/27)*

Sunday morning, Father Juan slowly walked up to the Holy Family Parish. It was late March and the weather had finally turned to spring. New growth could be seen every where, while most of the fields had new crops sprouting from the ground. The normally dusty brown margins on the roads had given over to the bright green of new growth. Father Juan tried to smile as he thought of this. Patricia Pérez, his Tia, had always loved spring. It was her favorite season. The idea that she was gone seemed foreign to him; impossible. He felt like he would walk home today after the service and right when he walked in the door she would call him to talk about the Lakers chances in the upcoming playoffs or about the new growth on the hills near her house, or the new hiking trail she had just discovered. All of the things she had called to talk with him about hundreds of times over the years. That was what felt real to him, nothing else.

It was the third Sunday of Lent and Father Juan made sure all the candles were in place before the service started. Normally Emily would arrive early and take care of these things but recently she had been spending more time at home and with Paul Doyle. He hoped this brought her some measure of

happiness.

The service went well and most of the parish was in the back hall enjoying a light lunch when Sheriff Johnson arrived with four of his deputies.

Seeing them arrive, Father Juan stood in place and put his hands at his sides. He didn't want to excite the deputies, especially in a room full of church members. Sheriff Johnson wasted no time by walking right up to him. Two of his deputies quickly surrounded him on either side.

"Father Juan Delgado" he said loud enough to be heard over the din of the parish meal. The room went instantly quiet, every eye on the sheriff and the priest.

"Yes, Sheriff Johnson," Father Juan said calmly. "What can I do for you?"

"What's this about?" Father Jacob said angrily as he approached the sheriff. "What are you doing here disrupting my parish?"

Sheriff Johnson looked suddenly unsure, angry. Before he could reply Father Juan stepped between them and raised his hands to placate the senior priest. "It's okay, Father," Father Juan said to him. "He didn't come here to disrupt the parish. He came here for me." Father Juan then turned to face the sheriff. "Isn't that right, Sheriff Johnson?"

"Well, er, yes it is," said the sheriff clearly uncomfortable when someone else took the initiative. "I came here to ask you a few questions, Father Juan."

"Here?" asked Father Juan.

"Here or at the jail in Dimmit," said the sheriff. "Makes no difference to me."

A gasp went through the room at this threat.

"I see," said Father Juan, pretending that he didn't notice how the sheriff was trying to make him look bad in front of the parishioners. "Well since you've been so kind as to give me a choice would you care to step into the parish office so we can discuss whatever it is you wish to discuss?" As he spoke, Father Juan indicated the sanctuary door with his arm.

The Sheriff nodded in assent as he, Father Juan, Father Jacob and the two deputies, walked into the sanctuary and from there into the small parish office.

Once they sat down the sheriff continued, "Were you aware," he asked, "that we found illegal drugs in the Alvarez Trucking Company warehouse?"

"No," said Father Juan, "I wasn't."

"Did you know," the sheriff continued, "that some of those drugs had finger



prints on them, your finger prints, Father Juan?"

"Now just a second here," interrupted Father Jacob. "You have no right to barge in here and make accusations like this."

"It's okay Father Jacob," Father Juan said standing up and placing his hands on the senior priest's arm. The senior priest was pointing accusingly at the sheriff but at Father Juan's gentle touch the arm fell to his side. "The sheriff here is just doing his job, that's all."

Father Jacob looked fiercely at Father Juan, consternation plain on the older priest's face. "It's okay, Father, really," the younger priest said. "He's just trying to rattle me hoping I might confess something and save him a lot of legal paperwork."

"He is," asked the senior priest? "How do you know?"

"Father," said Father Juan. "I've been arrested by men like this many times. I know my way around the legal system better than most, believe me."

Sheriff Johnson started to interrupt, "Now look here Father Juan."

Father Juan turned on the sheriff and gave him a look that would peel paint. "No, you look here, Sheriff Johnson," he said raising his voice for the first time. "I don't know why you are here but you've got no right to detain me without probable cause and you don't have that or you would have cuffed me already. Isn't that so?"

The sheriff nodded his head a fraction.

"My guess," continued Father Juan, "is that you think you have some evidence against me but you are waiting on a grand jury to convene so you can get an arrest warrant. Does that sound about right?"

The Sheriff starred daggers back at Father Juan but said nothing.

"I'll take that as a yes," said the priest.

"I'm warning you," said the sheriff putting his face close to the priest's. "I've seen the evidence and I'm going to nail your meddling little smart ass just as soon as I can get that damn grand jury together."

"I'm sure you will," said the priest calmly without flinching.

"Don't you think about running either," yelled the sheriff, his cheeks turning red. "Cause I'll shoot your ass just as easy as arrest you."

"Why am I not surprised," said the priest. "Since you'll be watching, I'm leaving town tomorrow for a few days. Consider this an official notice."

“You can’t run on my watch,” said the sheriff.

“I’m afraid I can,” said Father Juan. “Besides you need a warrant to detain me from my compassionate leave.”

“Compassionate leave?”

“Yes. My aunt died. I’m attending her funeral in California.”

“Funeral?” said the sheriff in disbelief. “When did you make this one up?”

“On Friday,” the older priest said menacingly as he stepped between Father Juan and the sheriff, “we, he got the call she had passed away.”

The sheriff turned his gaze towards Father Jacob, anger burning in his eyes. Then he realized what he was doing and averted his gaze.

“Do you have any other business here?” asked the senior priest. It wasn’t a question. It was a dismissal.

The sheriff shook his head then he pointed a finger at Father Juan. “Just make sure you come back,” he said, “or I’ll run you down like a dog.”

“Don’t you worry sheriff,” said Father Juan calmly. “This is my home. I’ll be back.”

The sheriff and his two deputies then turned and marched out of the church. Father Juan watched the senior priest ball his hand into a fist several times.

“What in the hell was that about?” said the senior priest, after the sheriff had left.

“I cannot say,” said Father Juan quietly.

“What?” shouted the older priest.

“I cannot say.”

“Why the hell not,” Father Jacob yelled.

“Forgive me Father. The seal of the confessional forbids me from telling you.”

Father Juan watched the senior priest clench and unclench his jaw several times until he thought he was going to burst. After a moment, the bright pin points of anger slowly drained from the priest’s eyes but the color on his cheeks remained.

“I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing, Father, but you better not play it in my parish again. Do you have that?”

Father Juan bowed his head in contrition. “Yes Father,” he said softly. “I understand.”

The older priest stomped out of the office and out to the fellowship hall where Father Juan could hear him placating the crowd. Oh god, he thought. What have I done now?

All the way home he kept seeing that look of betrayal in the senior priest's eyes. He would give anything to take that look back but he couldn't. The knowledge sat in his stomach like a rock. Worst still, he had seen the eyes of the parishioners looking at him and he knew he had lost their trust. A priest without a flock, he knew, was no priest at all. For some reason this thought terrified him but he did not know why.

When he got home he was stopped by his landlord on his way to his apartment.

"The sheriff came by today," she said in barely concealed anger.

Father Juan stopped and looked at her.

"He said he would be watching you. He told me it would be best if I kept Mali away from you."

Father Juan nodded his head, agreeing with the sheriff. Sadly, at this point it would be better for Mali to be away from him.

She looked at him. She was Philippino and grew up strongly Catholic. To even think poorly of a priest must be hell for this woman. He could see fear and revulsion at war with her inner respect for priests. It was plain on her face. And then he saw something else, curiosity. A curiosity like one gets when passing a bad accident on the freeway. You know you should look away from the blood and the gore but you just can't help yourself.

It was this look he saw when she asked, "What did you do?"

He sighed. "Nothing," he told her. "I helped a dying man. That's all."

He could see she didn't believe him but it was, after all, the truth. Father Juan really did hate to lie.

The next morning, Father Juan took his old truck up to Amarillo and caught a plane for Ontario, California. His flight required two lay-overs and a bit of running. By the time he got to his hotel room that evening in California he was exhausted.

## Chapter 54

*(Tuesday 3/29)*

It was raining by the time the taxi had picked him up at his hotel room and dropped him off at the Yucaipa Parish. Even though it was mid day, the color of the sky exactly matched the pavement of the parking lot; dark and grey. Father Juan in his best clerics walked into the back of the community room which was a large circular room with an open center and took a seat near one of the pillars near the back. The service had already started and the parish priest was leading the group in song. Pale light fell into the room from the windows behinds him and matched his mood perfectly. His head was stuffy from a runny nose and he had a slight headache either from jet lag or a lack of sleep. He wasn't sure which. The pain was a welcome distraction, keeping him from thinking too much about his aunt, like a heavy fog might allow a hiker to walk unconcerned along a path just a few feet away from a terrifying drop off. He knew there was a huge hole in his life from her passing. He just didn't want to investigate just how wide or deep it was right now. There would time for that later. Whatever later might imply.

The service was plain and homey, perfectly in keeping with Patty Pérez. His aunt had been the secretary of this parish for many years and she was well loved. Member after member of the parish stood and told their stories to the crowded room about her. Even if Father Juan had never known her, he could have told from the stories that his aunt was always willing to help and her insight was often profound. More than one priest stood and related a story of how her help had proved to be a blessing. Father Juan was not the only priest she had adopted straight out of seminary. There were also several higher priests and even two bishops, including Bishop Sousa, Father Juan's old friend.

All were dressed in their best, with the Bishops in full regalia. They stood out among the dull and drab clothing of the parishioners and lesser priests, yet they did not lead the service. That honor went to a young priest, a Father Sebastian, who was clearly only a year or two out of seminary. He looked lost and small among the senior church leaders and his clerics fit him like a rented suit, yet he gamely went on with service and from his remarks had obviously known Patty Pérez very well.

When the service finally ended Father Juan hurried out the exit and across the parking lot to the a small grassy hill behind the sanctuary. He knew he would eventually want to pay his respects to every one there, especially his Tio and Bishop Sousa but right then he was feeling too claustrophobic. He paced on the small hill, his feet making squishy sound on the wet grass and he walked in slow circles, trying to let his head decompress, to lift the weight of sadness off his chest. As he circled he listened to the sounds of people getting into their cars and the parking lot slowly emptying.

After a while he walked back to the front of the sanctuary and saw the taxi he had called drive up to the curb. Just as he got in, it started raining again, the heavy drops ringing inside the closed cab, making it sound like a drum being pounded by a large group of enthusiastic but uncoordinated young children. The main service was over and the only thing that remained was a private service for immediate family at the grave site. He rode in silence as the few cars lined up with their lights on and followed the hearse to the small cemetery in Redlands.

When they arrived, Father Juan paid his fare and walked over to the canopy they had placed over the gravesite. He was just in time to be handed a pair of white gloves and help carry her casket from the back of the hearse to the stand they had placed over the waiting gravesite. Along the way they walked over several granite markers; the graves of loved ones past. The rain made the markers look shiny as if waxed but the water also made the insides of each carved out letter turn dark and more difficult to read, making him feel as if he was standing in a room full of strangers he could not understand and would never know.

He remembered the time he had spent with Emily at the parish cemetery in Nazareth. The warmth he had felt there, the sense of belonging among all the Hoffmans long past, was so different from the forlorn cemetery he was at now, that it hit him like a sharp spike to his heart. It was all he could do to keep his composure as he and the other pall bearers, all of them clergy, shifted the casket into place.

The funeral director was a tall woman with dark eyes and a puff of hair. She wore a black dress which fit her figure well but to Father Juan she looked too lean, not shapely and soft, but hard, almost like an addict. Her smile was tired looking and her eyes weary but her voice was soft and professional as she directed the pall bearers out of the rain and under the canopy.

Although it was against the character of Patty Pérez, this time the small service was lead by Bishop Sousa. Since everyone there knew her, he kept the service short and to the point, his rich voice soft with respect, his prayers formal and refined. This was not the more modern style of informal service designed for comforting the lay members. This was a rigid, almost cold service for the church itself, using the language of formality and custom to say goodbye to one of its own. Outsiders, especially many Protestant believers would have found the service too formal but every priest there knew that under the veneer of formality was a bedrock of custom going back literally for thousands of years. The slowness of the pace, the steadiness of the forms and the formal speech of the prayers were not a hindrance to the people who had gathered. They were a foundation, a shelter in the storm. They cast aside the slings and arrows of the world outside, like the canopy above kept them out of the rain.

When the service was over, Father Juan drove Señor Pérez back to his home. The funeral had left him looking pale and old but as soon as he got to his home, he perked up as he ran into the kitchen and began preparing food for the many guests. Father Juan set aside his jacket, put on one of the many large aprons the Pérez's liked to keep in their home to help in the kitchen. Patty had taught him long ago how to work with his uncle and he found the simple labor a wonderful way to deal with his emotion and to talk to everyone at the party. And it was a party. Patty Pérez may have been dead but she lived on in everyone around her. She understood that people needed a time to mourn but she also would have insisted that death was a time of celebration, of thankfulness for having known the one who died; to happily acknowledge the joy that person had brought them. And Patty Pérez had brought a lot of joy.

After a while, the house slowly emptied and only a few guests remained. Father Juan had taken time off from the kitchen to enjoy a few hours with Bishop Sousa. They had each sipped a glass or two of wine while they sat on the back porch and caught up with each other. Now it was getting dark and Father Juan had gone back into the kitchen to help clean up. His uncle had finally pulled up a chair in the living room, leaving the priest to finish. When the last of the dishes had been put away, the counters, cleaned and the apron hung back on its peg, Father Juan stepped out to the back yard and sat down on a

bench still damp from the rain. He had just leaned back and closed his eyes when he heard the sound of a throat clearing.

“Ah, hum.”

Father Juan looked up to see the young priest from the service, Father Sebastian standing there. He stood tall and looked healthy, as most people did his age but his eyes held a fragile look that made Father Juan get up.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” the young priest said, “but Mrs. Pérez asked me to give this to you, after the funeral.”

Father Sebastian was holding a thin white envelope in his hand. On the outside was scribbled in a faint hand the word “Mijo”. Father Juan knew the hand-writing to be that of his Tia’s; holding it in his hands almost brought tears to his eyes. To cover his feelings he opened the envelope forcefully, as if ripping it open would stop the tears.

Inside he found a single sheet of paper, folded precisely into three parts. It was a letter, written in his Tia’s fine hand. It was addressed to him.

*Mijo,*

*By now I know I will not last until you get here. I am sorry for this. I always hoped you would be the one to give my last rights. I asked Father Sebastian to do them in your stead. He is a good kid with a kind heart and will probably feel ill at ease among so many older priests . Please do me a favor and keep an eye on him for me. He reminds me of a certain young priest, not all that long ago, who was a little overwhelmed by his duty, and responsibility.*

*Now that I am gone and can tell you what I have always wanted to say. You always were my favorite, like the son I always wanted, but was not blessed by God to have . But you were always more than a son. You were also my dearest friend. Even in heaven, I know I will miss you terribly, as I know you will miss me.*

*I have always been proud of you. You have always done your best, despite your curse, to love those around you, and this has always been an inspiration to me. I knew that no matter what happened in your life, you would try and find a way to help and heal those around you and this has brought me much joy and not too little pride.*

*My only regret is that I will not be able to tell you these things in*

*person. The cancer has moved very rapidly, faster than I wished.*

*There is so much more that I wanted to say, but time will not allow. Remember me in your prayers, as I will you.*

*Goodbye my little mijo.*

*Via con Dios.*

Father Juan looked up, tears streaming from his eyes. Father Sebastian stood nearby but facing away, as if this would give the older priest more privacy. Father Juan stepped over to him and without saying a word wrapped him in his arms. The younger priest started crying as well, both men clung to each other as the pain let loose inside. After a while they relaxed and separated, each man wiping tears from his eyes and sniffing.

Father Juan held up the letter. "She said you gave her the last rights."

"Yes," the younger priest said pensively.

"Thank you," Father Juan said. "It means a lot to me that you were there to do this for her."

"But, Father... I've never done the last rights before," said the young priest.

Father Juan grunted knowingly. "I felt the same way my first time."

"You did? Mrs. Pérez told me once she had a friend, a priest, who had given the rights hundreds of times. Is that you? Are you that priest?"

"Yes," Father Juan said wearily.

"Wow," said the younger priest in admiration. "What a wonderful ministry that must be. May I ask how many times have you given them?"

Father Juan stared out into space for a second, thinking. The rain had moved on but low clouds remained, framing the nearby hills in misty grey, contrasting with the darker green of vegetation. The setting sun came out in patches, shining in bright color, the signs of new bright green growth, among the older plants, dark green and grey from their winter coloring. In Southern California the rainy season, such as it was, came in February and often stayed until March. By early spring the hills were spotted with bright green of weeds growing rapidly. They'd be two to three feet high within a month and dried up stems with seeds in another month, but right now they were green, alive, and just starting to flower.

"Hundreds of times, I guess," said Father Juan not looking at Father



Sebastian. "After a while, you lose count. The number itself...it's not important."

"It's not?"

"No," said Father Juan crumpling the letter as if squeezing it would bring one more touch of her.

"But I feel so unworthy, like I did something wrong, like I made some terrible mistake."

Father Juan turned to the younger priest his eyes hard like glass. "You are unworthy," he said harshly. "That's how you are supposed to feel."

"But..."

Father Juan put an arm around the shoulders of the other priest, quieting him. In a softer voice he continued, "You're missing the point. It's not about how worthy you are. You are interceding for the creator of the universe. For all of this," he said, as he used his free arm to indicate the mountains behind the house. "Of course you are not worthy. None of us are. That's not the point. God does not care if you are worthy. He only cares if you are willing. That is the point."

He took his arm from around the young priest and noticed the letter was still in his hand. He smoothed it out quietly, folded it back into three equally sized pleats and put it back in the envelope he had kept in his suit pocket. "This," he said, holding up the envelope before putting it back in his pocket, "Pretty much says the same thing. Not in so many words because Tia, Mrs. Pérez, would never be so blunt. She was always nicer, much nicer than I'll ever be, unless I had done something stupid. Then.... well, then she would let you know." he said with a smile.

The other priest smiled back but it was a fragile smile.

Father Juan turned and rested his hand on his shoulder. "Thank you, brother."

"For what?"

"For reminding me on how important it is for me to be willing and how silly it is to be worried about being worthy."

The younger priest smiled again. This time it was the smile of a young man who knows he had done well, like the bright green of new growth in the hills above.

## Chapter 55

*(Friday 4/1)*

Father Juan arrived early at the airport for his flight back to Amarillo and as a consequence he was one of the first passengers seated. The flight out had found him next to a middle-aged housewife who tried to overcome her fear of flying by talking incessantly. She took great comfort in sitting next to a priest, a fact she mentioned about 20 times. This time he sat in his preferred window seat and the seat next to him was unoccupied. The flight attendant kept checking the empty seat every few minutes. Her serious expression and repeated glances started to make Father Juan nervous. Finally, when the plane was completely full, save the one seat next to Father Juan, he saw two heavily armed police approach the plane with a handcuffed man wearing a bright orange coverall between them. Well that explains that, he thought, as the cops marched the man to the only empty seat and proceeded to handcuff him to it.

“What if we crash?” the man in the orange coverall asked, jerking up his hands a short distance before the chains stopped them short. “What’ll I do?”

One of the cops still had his sunglasses on. He reached over, patted the prisoner on the shoulder, while showing a nasty smile under his short mustache. “Don’t worry Barret. You’re sitting next to a priest. Safest place on a plane.”

“But I’m not a Catholic, you jerk.”

“Well,” said the cop, sunglasses reflecting a cold glare. “Now’s a good time to convert, right Padre?” He looked at Father Juan once but didn’t wait for a response. “Have fun in Texas,” the cop said as he patted the prisoner one more time on the shoulder. “I’m sure they’re going to have fun with you.”

With a nasty laugh, the two cops left. The door closed right behind them

“Perfect,” muttered the prisoner Barrett under his breath. Father Juan caught the complaint just under the roar of engine noise as the plane backed up. “Right next to a fucking priest.”

Father Juan turned and looked down at the man. He was graying, in his forties, body going round and slouchy. A large metal band circled his middle finger; a class ring of some kind.

“What,” Barrett said defensively. “Never seen a criminal before?”

Father Juan looked at the man levelly, “All the time,” he replied, “All the time. What are they extraditing you to Texas for?”

“Nothin.”

Father Juan raised an eyebrow. Barrett must have seen his disbelief.

“I’m telling you priest, nothin. I didn’t take a dime from that fuck-head boss in Amarillo. He just made that shit up because I sold more furniture for his ungrateful ass than that precious son of his. Then he blames me because his son is fingering the till. I’m telling you, once they get me into court I’m walking out a free man.”

Father Juan smiled as he felt relief wash over him. So far as he knew, petty thieves were not affected by his gift. “I’m sure you’re right,” he said to the man. “Would you like me to pray for a speedy trial,” he asked?

Barrett looked at the priest out of the corner of eye, not used to being offered anything without cost. “No thank you, father. No offense but I’m not the believin’ type.”

“That’s okay,” said the priest with a smile. “Sometimes you don’t need to be.”

With that, the priest sat back in chair and looked out the window as the runway sped past and then fell away, only to be replaced by slow moving clouds dropping further and further below.

Father Juan sat next to Barrett the entire flight. The man’s constant grumbling and complaints made the priest on edge. When they landed in Amarillo, the priest was glad to see the Texas sheriffs come and take the little thief away.

After driving home and a quick shower, Father Juan ate a light dinner and tried to go to bed early. He tossed and turned in the sheets until he finally got up and grabbed a theology book which was guaranteed to put him to sleep. Two chapters in, he finally closed his eyes, only to open them the next morning at 10:00. With a groan he got up and stretched. Using his fingers to comb his unruly hair, he put on his clerics and headed for Holy Family Parish at a quick walk.

Throughout his walk, Father Juan kept hoping he would run into Emily so he

could talk to her, and then hoping he wouldn't, so he could get her out of his mind. While at the funeral he had constantly thought of her and just last night had finally concluded the only way he could fix this dilemma was to not see her anymore. He realized it was not healthy for him to be around her. She needs to be with her fiancée, he reasoned, and I need to not think about her any more.

He was lost in this thought as he came through the church's front door and thus didn't see Paul's red Expedition in the parking lot. The first time he realized the retired coach was there was when he walked into the church office and found the man leaving Father Jacob's study.

"Hey, Paul," he said from across the small office.

Paul looked around at hearing his name and saw Father Juan. Surprise flashed across his face. Just as quickly the look faded. He hurriedly passed the priest and headed into the sanctuary.

Father Juan followed him, calling out to Paul as he was half-way to the back door. "Hey coach," he said. "I've been wanting to talk to you."

Paul stopped. "What about," he replied without turning around? His tone flat, devoid of emotion.

"Um," said Father Juan, not expecting such a reply. "Well to say congratulations, I guess. Maybe set up another game night?"

Paul turned and looked at Father Juan again with surprise. Then his surprise turned to something else. Fear. "Haven't you done enough?" he asked, disgust obvious in his voice.

"Huh?" said the priest. "What are you talking about?"

"You know damn well what I'm talking about," Paul said, obviously angry. He turned and headed out the back of the sanctuary. At the back door he stopped to face the priest again. Father Juan was too stunned to say anything. "And stay away from Emily too," Paul added, pointing a finger at Father Juan.

"What was that about?" the priest said to himself. He watched Paul back up his SUV, and drive away.

## Chapter 56

Father Juan made his way back to the office, feeling more and more perplexed. He walked in just as Father Jacob was coming out of his study.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you...” the senior priest said in a serious tone.

“What was that all about?” interrupted Father Juan.

The senior priest looked surprised.

“I’m sorry, Father,” Father Juan said. “I just ran into Paul and he was angry at me. What did you say you needed? You wanted to talk to me?”

“Um, yes, father. This way please,” the senior priest said indicating his study.

Father Juan walked past Father Jacob and into his office. On the way past he noticed Emily’s desk had several notes piled up on it. Normally she kept her desk spotless. He was pretty sure she hadn’t been to her desk in a while.

“What’s up?” he asked taking a seat opposite the large desk.

The senior priest closed the door and sat down in his chair. He folded his hands across his belly and looked at Father Juan with a frown.

“Something has come to my attention,” the senior priest said, “Which greatly disturbs me.”

Father Juan could feel his stomach tighten. No smile. No question about the funeral, he thought. This cannot be good.

“What’s the matter, Father Jacob? Is it Emily? Is she okay?”

The senior priest looked back at Father Juan but said nothing. Finally he said, “She’s fine. Fine. Really she’s fine. She asked for the day off to go shopping in Amarillo. She and Paul have moved up their wedding date and we were just trying to work out the details.” The senior priest fidgeted with his collar and looked around room while speaking not meeting Father Juan’s eyes.

What is going on, Father Juan thought to himself.

Father Jacob let out a sigh and then turned to face Father Juan again, his frown back in place. “Look, Father. I heard a rumor and needed to check on it. I’m waiting on a call. It shouldn’t be too long. Will you stay here in the church for a little while, until I get it?”

“Uh, sure,” said Father Juan. “I was planning on catching up on paperwork anyway.” The senior priest seemed disturbed, anxious. Father Juan didn’t know what he was up to but he was happy to help. “Um,” he asked. “Is that okay?”

“Ah, sure, sure,” said the senior priest stiffly. “That’ll be fine. Yes, fine.”

“Ooh-kay,” said the junior priest. “Is it okay if I go to my office and start?”

“Fine, fine,” said the senior priest waving him out. “Yes, go right ahead.”

Father Juan got up, opened the door and walked over to his cubicle. There were some papers left for him. Emily had carefully stuck some questions on top of each stack with blue post-it notes. She had worked out a system using these post-it notes. Yellow ones meant a paper needed to be done soon, blue ones meant revisions or clarifications were needed and orange ones meant it needed to be done right away. He scanned through the pile looking to see if there were any orange notes. For some reason this made him miss her. Shoving that thought aside, he picked up the first sheet with a blue post-it and started to work. Before long he noticed an hour had passed and most of the pile was gone. He finished up the last paper, picked up the stack and placed them in Emily’s in-box on her desk. Father Jacob was sitting in his office, talking on the phone with the door open.

“Uh-huh,” he said. “Yes, he’s here.” There was a long pause. “Are you sure you found it? Okay. Good. Then you’ll be right over? Okay. Good-bye.”

Father Jacob hung up the phone.

“Who was that?” Father Juan asked.

“Huh?” said the senior priest. “Um, you’ll find out soon enough.”

Father Juan looked at the older priest but could read nothing by his expression.

“Have a seat,” Father Jacob said indicating the other chair in his office. Father Juan walked in and sat down.

“I’ve heard a rumor,” the senior priest said without preamble, “that your family used to sell drugs. Is that so?”

“What?” said Father Juan in surprise. “Um, sure. Yes. They were in a gang. It was what they did for money.”

“I see,” said the senior priest putting his hands together in a steeple and resting his chin on them. “You said they did this for money?”

“Yes, for money.”

“A lot of money,” the senior priest asked?

Where is this going, Father Juan thought to himself? Out loud he said, “Well that depends on what you mean by a lot of money.”

“Yes, I guess it does,” said Father Jacob. “More, than say a priest’s income?” he asked.

“What,” asked Father Juan in surprise. “Um yes, Father, more, much more, than a priest’s income, a lot more.”

“I see,” said the senior priest. “And did you have anything to do with this, these drug sales?”

“Directly?” Father Juan said. “Not really. My mother wanted me to be a priest, so she tried to keep me out of the business, the family business. But I was around it all the time. And my family, they were funny about me being a priest. Even before I went to school or was ordained, they used to confess to me. You know, tell me everything.”

“Everything?”

“Yes, father. It was a funny way to live, for a kid that is.”

“Are they still doing it now? Selling drugs I mean?”

“No father,” Father Juan said. “Not any more.”

“Why not?” asked the senior priest.

“They died, Father. They’re all dead.”

“Oh. Yes, I see,” said senior priest distractedly.

Just then Father Juan heard the sound of people entering the sanctuary. They were using hushed tones, one reserves for talking in a library or an empty church. Over the sound of their voices he heard the growl of a police radio; the compressed voice of a dispatcher. Both priests turned towards the office entrance just as Sheriff Johnson and a few deputies stepped in.

“Afternoon, Father Jacob,” the sheriff said with a nod. “Father Juan.”

Both priests said hello.

“Father Juan,” the sheriff said, “I was wondering what you could tell me about this?” The sheriff placed a shaving bag on the senior priest’s desk. It was a medium sized shaving bag made of some kind of brown fake leather. An open zipper ran from one side to the next. Sheriff Johnson handled the bag carefully, wearing disposable gloves.

“Hmm,” said Father Juan. “Not much. Looks like a ditty bag to me. Whose is it?”

“So you’ve never seen this bag before?” the sheriff asked.

“Nope,” said Father Juan, “not at all.”

“Are you sure?” asked the sheriff.

“Positive,” said Father Juan.

The sheriff put a hand on either side of the bag and pulled it open. “Take a look inside,” he said.

The bag was filled with money, stacks of money.

Father Juan let out a low whistle. “Whew. That’s quite a pile.”

“About ten thousand dollars worth,” said the sheriff.

“Ten grand, that looks about right,” said Father Juan.

“Then perhaps,” the sheriff said, “you can tell us what it was doing in your truck.”

“What!”

The sheriff turned to Father Jacob. “We found it sitting on his front seat,” he said with a sneer, “just like you said.”

“What are you talking about?” protested Father Juan. “I’ve never seen it before.”

The sheriff ignored Father Juan. “I’m going to have to take him in, Father,” he said to Father Jacob. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course not,” said the older priest, a look of sadness on his face. “Please take him away.”

Father Juan stood up. “Father, Father Jacob. You’ve got to believe me. I’ve never seen this money before. It’s not mine!”

But the senior priest just looked away and shook his head, a look of deep sadness on his face.

“You have the right to remain silent,” Sheriff Johnson said, as the deputies hand-cuffed the younger priest. “Anything you say, can and will be used against you in a court of law...”

Father Juan dropped his head. “But you have to believe me,” he whispered. “You have to...”

The deputies lead Father Juan out to their car and put him in the back seat. As they drove out of the church parking lot he saw Wendy Keim standing next to her car, hand over her mouth in shock, watching them drive him away.



## Chapter 57

*(Sunday, 4/3, Laetare)*

That Sunday, Father Juan sat alone in his cell and prayed, like he did every day. He prayed for the District Attorney, the judges and the sheriffs, that they would do their work well and without error. He prayed for the people at his parish, that they would have faith in God and not lose their faith by his actions. He prayed for Father Jacob, that God would give him strength. And he prayed for Emily and Paul, that they would find happiness. For himself, he prayed only that God would do his will. It was enough for him. It was always enough.

It was Laetare Sunday, the half-way point for Lent, the celebration that comes with reaching the half-way point on a long and difficult journey. All over the world, priests would trade the regular purple vestments of Lent with the happier rose color. He liked this day, this part of the liturgical calendar. It always reminded him that hope was just around the corner. He only wished someone would come to visit so he could share his optimism.

That night Father Juan had a strange dream. He dreamed he was at home, the apartment building his family lived in when he was a child. He was asleep in his bed and yet somehow he wasn't. He felt spirit float free above his body, unafraid, unconcerned. His spirit floated out through his door and into the hallway. It crossed the kitchen and went to his mother's office; the spare bedroom where she did all of her family business, a room he was never allowed to go into alone. He saw his mother seated at her desk, the one she would sit behind because it made others feel intimidated. His mother was good at intimidation. Across from his mother was an old lady. She looked ancient, wrinkled skin, grey haired and yet with clear eyes that gleamed of hidden power. Without knowing why, he knew she was a curandera, a witch. She was not intimidated by his mother, quite the opposite in fact. The curandera was telling his mother something in her rough accented Spanish, something important.

"He must choose," she was saying moving her arm up and down to emphasize her point, "of his own free will. He cannot be coerced. This is terribly important. I cannot stress this enough."

His mother waived her hand in the way that meant she was listening with only half an ear. This was a point they had gone over many times. "Si, si, Abuela. He is willing. He said so himself. Why just the other day he told he had no other ambition but to be a priest."

“I did?” thought the spirit of Father Juan. “I don’t remember that.”

His mother was still speaking. “It is perfectly okay, I tell you, nothing to worry about.”

“You are sure sister?” the curandera said, flattering his mother by calling her by the familiar family name. “This is true?”

“Verdad,” his mother responded. “It is true.”

Something was wrong about this conversation. They were lying he could tell, both of them. His mother was lying about his desire to be a priest. He knew this because he could clearly remember just the day before telling his mother he was having second thoughts about the priesthood. His mother had shushed him with that look of hers that meant she would not listen to him no matter what was said. He was used to that look.

But the curandera was lying too. He was sure of it. She wanted him to be a priest. She wanted him to be one in spite of her warning. Why, he thought, would she do something like that?

“If you are sure,” the curandera said to his mother’s nod, “then I will ordain the boy. But understand, if you are wrong, it will be on your head. You and your family’s.”

Both ladies were smiling in a way that made Father Juan feel ill.

Father Juan woke with a start. The dream was so vivid, he could remember everything. The lights, the sounds, the way the apartment smelled just before it rained. It had happened, he was sure of it, only he didn’t know how he knew. And the curandera; he remembered her vividly. She had come to their apartment when he was 15. She was short, fierce and smelled of the desert, of far away places of power. He remembered the bones in her hair, the worn, dirty dress that she wore, and the way her hands looked like claws when she moved. He never knew why she came, only now he did. She came because his mother wanted him to be a priest. She wanted him to be her own priest. Not some ninny from the church. She wanted a priest she could control, one who would do her will. She wanted her own conduit into the divine.

“Well good luck with that mother,” he said quietly as he sat in his cell, his mother some 20 years dead. “Good luck with that.”

Then like a flash he remembered where he had seen the curandera before. By the pump, the magic pump, the pump that worked but didn't work. The one with no power wires attached to it, yet cold water flowing out of it. She was the one, the curandera. She was the one making the water flow. The one making the other wells stop working. He was sure of it.

Only it didn't make any sense. Why? Why take the water? Why make the wells go dry? And what could he do about it in jail?

## Chapter 58

*(Sunday, 4/17, Palm Sunday)*

The following Sunday afternoon, they let him out of jail. No explanation, no threats. They just handed him his things and showed him the door. He got the desk sergeant to have one of the sheriffs give him a lift back to his apartment. He was free but his truck would remain in the impound yard until regular office hours on Monday.

The place looked about the same but several weeks of inactivity had caused more dust than he cared for. It was Palm Sunday, the day Jesus entered Jerusalem. The crowds had cheered the Lord as he entered the town on a donkey, he thought. Only no one was here to cheer Father Juan as he cleaned his apartment, vacuuming and scrubbing until the place was spotless. He stopped at the local store to get a few things. He dressed in his casual clothes, not his clerics. That way he hoped no one would recognize him. When he got home he put together a small dinner, said his prayers and went to bed early, content for the first time in over a week just to be able to go where ever he wanted.

That night he popped up at midnight, wide awake. There was an edge to his mood, a hunger. He got up, put on his running clothes and quietly left his apartment, careful to be sure he locked the door well. Ever since the money had been found in his truck, which he usually kept unlocked, Father Juan had become a fan of locking things behind him. At the bottom of the stairs a soft glow came from around the corner. He walked over to find the shrine still there, only this time there were several new candles, including one tall white one. Why white, he wondered, as he started his jog. But he didn't know the answer.

Before long, Father Juan was running at a fast pace, sweeping through the sleeping country side, enjoying the unusually warm spring night air. He ran and he ran, feeling the anger, the sadness, all of it pour out of him in his sweat. Finally, exhausted, but centered, he stopped at a clump of trees to catch his breath. Even in the dark he knew where he was. He was at the old Settler's place. The place of the magic well.

In the dark he could hear the pump running, that impossible pump. The spring weather had brought a variety of wild flowers which grew in abundance around the base of the trees and at the foot of the old home's foundation. He could smell them, their intoxicating fragrance, even if he could not see them in the dark. Against the moonlight on the light colored flowers, his eyes could just make out a shape, a woman. He saw the shape and without thinking called out, "Emily. Is that you?"

Instantly she was in front of him, glowing, beautiful. Her clothes covered her and yet revealed much of her shapely figure. Her hair was thick and dark. Her breath was sweet and warm on his neck. She put her arms around him and he knew what she wanted. She wanted to lay with him, naked, in the moonlight. She wanted him inside her. He could feel it in his bones. His crotch ached for release and he thought his heart would burst with happiness. He put his arms around her. He felt her tender body press against his. He went to gently lay her down and right before he set her on the ground his arm brushed her elbow. He felt not the warm tender flesh of his beloved but the cold dead bone of a skeleton.

Father Juan jerked back as if shocked. Looking down on the body in front of him he said. "Who are you? What do you want?"

Suddenly the old crone was standing in front of him, the curandera. Lust fled his body as if turned off by a switch, as if he had just been dumped in a pool of cold water. Anger and confusion warred within him until his brain hurt from the pressure. He fought both emotions down and took a deep breath to calm himself.

"Hello, Abuela," the priest said in Spanish.

"Hola, mijo," the curandera replied.

"You, you have startled me, Abuela. I had no idea your power was so great."

The curandera looked back for a moment, anger and respect in her eyes. "Nor did I suspect such discipline from you, Mijo," she said. "Perhaps that is well. You and I might be too well matched."

"As you say, Abuela. I do not know much about these things."

The old crone laughed, “I suppose you don’t Mijo, and I am probably too old to teach you.”

Then she waived her arms around her, like a bird silently flapping it’s wings and suddenly they were in a daylight. Somehow his eyes were not pained at the transition from pitch black to bright sunny day. This made Father Juan marvel even more at her power. He nodded to her when he saw two chairs under the big tree. The land around the tree was exactly like it was before, only untouched by human hands. There were no roads, no plowed Earth, no signs of any human habitation. It was as if the tree was resting in the season of spring, not just any spring but the perfect, idealized version of spring. They sat down in the chairs together. He closed his eyes and let the sun play across his face for a moment, enjoying the warmth. Then he opened his eyes and looked deep into hers.

“Okay, Abuela,” he said. “Tell me why you brought me here.”

She laughed a happy laugh and the years fell off her face until she was middle-aged, beautiful but not sexy like before. Her eyes held both the happiness of every stolen kiss and the sadness of every child buried too young.

“You are an interesting man, Mijo. I thought you and I... well it doesn’t matter what I thought. I guess I will get to business. "We are here," she said indicating the perfect spring world around her, “so we can talk." This is a place without time. I like to borrow it from my sister every once in a while. It’s a perfect place to talk, as nothing here can affect the other places. We are safe here, you and I.”

At these words Father Juan suddenly realized it was true. He was safe with her here.

“I brought you here, although it might be more accurate to say you were brought here Mijo, to work out a point. You are at a crossroads, a place where your two life paths cross. You must choose a path to go forward but only one of them.

“Two paths, Abuela?” the priest asked.

“Yes, Mijo, two. The one path is the one you chose, the other is the one chosen for you. You are at a point were you can switch from one path to the other but you can only do so once. From the moment you have made your choice you will never be able to return to the other path again, ever. It will be dead to you.”

Father Juan was about to speak, but she held a finger to his lips to silence him. “There is more, Mijo. There is a cost to your choice. You must trade one

ambition for another. That is the price you must pay.”

“I don’t understand,” Father Juan said.

“You must pay with one ambition or the other. Each path foreword requires this. This is the choice you must make. You must choose which life to give up and which life to keep. It is the only way.”

“Which path? Which ambition, Abuela? I am confused,” the priest said.

“Don’t worry Mijo,” the woman said with genuine tenderness. “You are a strong man. When the time comes, you will know what to do.”

“I will?” Father Juan asked.

“Yes, Mijo, you will. Now sleep, sleep. You have been honored more than most men, to be given this choice. Rejoice, for to see this garden is beyond what most mortals will see and live to tell.”

Father Juan could feel the spring garden fading away. He could sense the approaching smell of humanity, the knowledge of sin, the power of death. He could feel all those things slowly claim the land around him again, slip into his skin. He was back in the real world. The one he lived in.

Before he fell asleep he saw a woman leaning over him. It was his mother. Not the evil woman he knew but the perfect version of her, the idealized form; like the old oak tree that sitting in the perfect idealized version of spring. This was his mother, only it was the version of her she could never be. The one he never met. She leaned over him and whispered, “Have faith, Mijo. You will make the right choice.” And then as if an afterthought she added, “We have disturbed your life enough. You will be free of us soon.” And then she was gone.

Father Juan’s eyelids closed and he dropped into a deep sleep. Above him a skeleton rose and walked into the night.

## Chapter 59

*(Good Friday 4/22)*

Father Juan woke up on Friday morning, Good Friday, and looked out his window. It was still early but the sun was already up and people were going about their day. It was one of the things he liked about Nazareth. All his life he

had found himself waking up early, only to have to tip-toe around those near him who were still in bed. In Nazareth, it seemed like the entire town got up early, ready to face the day. He had finally found a town that kept a decent schedule and he was reluctant to leave.

And leaving the town was a serious concern for him. Today was the day he had set aside to decide if he would leave Nazareth or not and he found himself just as unsure as the day he had set this date aside specifically to make this decision.

All his life Father Juan had found that he put off difficult decisions unless he set a specific date to do so. It was a habit he found handy to keep. Usually the process of watching the calendar focused his thinking so he was sure of the proper path well before the date came around. Only this decision was different. For the first time he could not decide what to do.

The church had sent him a registered letter while he was still in the jail at Dimmit. He had it somewhere in his belongings but he wasn't sure where, probably in the pile of unopened mail that had accumulated while he was gone. All he remembered was the words "excommunicated" and the latin phrase "latae sententiae." In many ways this was good, as a latae sententiae excommunication was the automatic kind; given to a believer after committing a specific act. Excommunication, literally the "putting out" of a believer from communion, meant Father Juan could no longer receive the blood and body of Christ. It also meant he could not longer participate in any liturgical activities. He could still attend Mass at the parish but he could not act as a priest. Since confession was considered a liturgical activity, he wondered if this would affect his curious "gift." Somehow, he didn't think so.

Father Juan knew he could be accepted back into the church by issuing a statement of repentance. Making this statement to Father Jacob in the privacy of the confessional booth would be enough. His problem was he didn't know what sin he had done in order to repent for it. He also strongly doubted that the parishioners at Holy Cross would trust him again for their spiritual leadership after his arrest and subsequent trial by the press. He was pretty sure Father Jacob wouldn't accept him in any case. He didn't blame the older priest for this, in fact he respected him for his leadership. Sometimes protecting the flock meant culling one from it. It was not a nice lesson to learn but it was still a sound one.

The letter from the church had informed him that a more formal ecclesiastical court would be convened to determine if his excommunication was to be considered *ferendae sententiae*. That would be a more difficult problem. A

ferendae sententiae excommunication could only be absolved by the office of Bishop or higher. Father Juan didn't think he could count on Bishop Sousa to help him out of this one.

As a practical consequence of this action, the church was no longer paying him to be a priest and he had no other source of income. This is what made the decision to move more difficult. Normally, when a parish would discover his "gift" they would quietly have him transferred to another parish. Father Juan had never been in the position where there was not another parish to transfer to.

So what was he to do for money? He had the equivalent of a college degree and had many years experience of teaching in parish schools. There just wasn't a lot of ways to make money in this town and he suspected the publicity over his arrest would deter any possible job even if one were to miraculously appear.

Not quite sure what to do, Father Juan decided to go through his mail. Most of it was junk which he tossed in the trash. Several letters were from friends of his, part of his circle of supporters from past parishes, each letting him know they supported him and were praying for him. A few of the letters were death threats. He had received quite a few of these in his day. One lady even wrote him asking if he would like to get married. She even promised to wear an alligator dress, whatever that was. This made Father Juan laugh out loud.

Near the bottom of the pile he came across another letter from his cousin Pepe Romero. After the death threats and the bizarre marriage offer, Pepe's letter seemed downright normal in comparison.

The letter started:

*Jaime,*

*I know you are going through much right now, dear cousin. I am writing to offer you my support, which you probably already knew, and to tell you that I am praying for you daily. I wish I could also report to you good news, but that is not to be.*

*The rumor around here is Ecclesiastical Court is taking your case, and has already set a date for the formal hearing. You can be sure this action is driven not by any concern for your well being, but by the way the popular press has treated your case. You may not have known, but while you were in jail, the "Drug Selling Priest" was national news for some time. Mother Church was already hurting from the lack of proper action with those terrible priests who sinned against innocent children, and I'm afraid that many priests, and even*



*a few Bishops, feel they need to make a public example of you to show they are taking care of the church. Pity they didn't think of this when they allowed a few wolves to wander through their flocks.*

*You can expect to receive a formal letter from them soon.*

*I rejoice that I will finally be able to see you face to face after all these years, as the Court will convene here at the college. I just wish it was under different circumstances. If it's not too much to ask, I was hoping you could come by and offer a few words for my Mystics class. I think it would mean much more to the kids if they met someone who had some real experience with forces outside of the normal church. The kids these days are so focused on orthodoxy that they often miss the other side of our spiritual heritage. You would be just the cure for this narrow thinking, I am sure.*

*I included a few things I found for you. I will admit I do not know why I have sent them. Sometimes I feel a strong direction in my prayers, and there is an easy link between the person I am praying for, and the materials the holy spirit tells me to send. In your case, I am completely baffled. I have no idea why you would need to read these particular pages from this particular book. I only hope this makes more sense to you than it does to me. One thing is certain, Santa Muerte has claimed you as her own. May she offer you her protection against this plague of the popular press, like blood painted on the lintels of the faithful in Egypt protected their firstborn.*

*Yours, in prayer,*

*Friar Paul*

The next page was a photocopy of a book. Hand written on the top were the words, "We" by Robert A Johnson, pgs 78-79. Near the top of page 79 a quote had been marked with a yellow highlighter. It read:

*Anima, with sword in hand, is a dangerous being, capable of leaving a trail of destruction in her path. But Anima, like Iseult, will make peace. If we go in search of her, if we treat her as an equal, if we seek her world and her wisdom, she will make peace and she will open up to us her inner world.*

On the margin, was a note that read: *Anima = Woman with power over life/death = Santa Muerte?*

## Chapter 60

The letter sat in his hand while his head spun. He set it on the table and looked out his window thinking. He felt a headache coming, the kind he used to get as a kid. Every time the Santa Ana winds would blow the hot dry air out of the desert and into LA, he would get these headaches. The dryness always made his sinuses painful and tender like they had been scoured with steel wool. Only it was spring and he was in North Texas. It shouldn't be that dry here, he thought.

Feeling irritated for no reason he went back to the mail pile. The letter underneath was a check from the church, possibly his last. This was something he knew what to do with. The nearest bank was in Dimmit. He would go there and close his account, an act he had done so many times, it bordered on the ordinary. They would cut him a cashier's check which he would use to open a new account in the next town, whatever town the church eventually sent him to. In the mean time, he would cash the check in his hand to cover his living expenses.

He got up from the table and poured himself a second cup of coffee while he put on some clothes. It felt funny to him to not be wearing his clerics or the dog collar, as he liked to joke. He hadn't worn them since the day he was arrested and would not don them again until he received a formal declaration of the reconciliation by a priest or bishop and then take the sacrament of Reconciliation by their same hand.

Thinking about his clothing made his head hurt more. He would have to buy some more civilian clothes today. The few things he owned were not enough for a prolonged time and were more suited for exercise, not regular wear. He might not be a priest again for a while. Much as he hated the idea, he had to plan accordingly. Father Juan had seen much in his time and suffered more at the hands of a fickle church than most priests but he had never been excommunicated before. The church had always loved him, always held on to

him, even if at arms length. This excommunication felt like a rejection and it hurt more than he cared to think about.

He also had to admit that the few exercise clothes he did have did not fit so well any more. The weeks of inactivity in jail had turned his body soft, more so than he would have thought possible and he had gained a lot of weight. Since his release he had not found the discipline to take up running again which was just one more thing to chastise himself for.

On his way down the stairs he decided to check on the little shrine around the corner. He found it neat and in order. The tall white candle had burned down to a stub. Last Sunday it was a curiosity, almost menacing in both its size and by the unknown prayer it represented. Now in the daylight it looked sadder, like the end of something. Like the end of a dramatic foreign movie.

Without much thought, Father Juan found himself back upstairs rummaging around in his hall closet. He found a box he had yet to unpack and from within took out two tall white candles he had received ages ago from a salesman for a religious products company. The man had been kind and sad trying to drum up his flagging sales the old fashioned way, by going from church to church. Father Juan had spent a pleasant morning with the man and had talked at length with him over lunch. He had grey eyes, dull brown hair and a hangdog expression about him that the priest could empathize. Even though the salesman was an admitted atheist, Father Juan had hoped he would show up for Mass the next Sunday. The man never appeared and was in fact let go from his company not long after. Father Juan kept the candles as a reminder that the needs of the flock did not end at the sanctuary door but extended out into the world beyond.

Back down the stairs, Father Juan placed both candles in a couple of empty votives. They were much too tall for the glass containers but the votives would hold the candles upright which was all that mattered. A pack of matches were laying nearby. Father Juan used the last couple to light the candles then he sat back to see if they would burn properly. Once he was sure they would keep burning he started to get up but stopped in mid stoop. With a shrug, he got back on his knees and prayed to the Saint of Death. Not sure what to say, he prayed for guidance. He prayed for understanding. He thanked the saint for her many blessings to him, acknowledging the gifts that she had given to him were beyond his fair share. He thanked her for letting him witness more miracles than most men would ever know and for the ability to see death as a gift, not a curse. Finally he asked her to intercede for him, to help his heart understand the will of God. "Not my will be done," he prayed earnestly, "but that of the Father's."

When he was finished, he got up, took in a lungful of the clean dry air and walked to his truck with a smile. He placed the check on the seat next to him and started the short drive to Dimmit. For the first time since he had been released from jail, he started to whistle.

When he got into town, he parked his truck in the parking lot and headed for the bank's front door. On the way he passed a group of Latinos sitting on a small wall nearby. They looked to be day laborers; rough men from south of the border who came to work on the farms. The men were smiling and talking animatedly. Something had sparked their morning and they were discussing it enthusiastically in their rapid-fire but rustic Spanish. "Hola," he said in a friendly tone as he passed, recognizing some of the men from Sunday Mass.

The men stopped and turned to face him. Even though Father Juan was wearing regular clothing, "civilians" as he like to call them, his height and dark skin marked him out as much as his collar. "Hola, Padre," they said, practically in unison, bowing their heads as they spoke.

This simple sign of respect touched Father Juan. He bowed his head in return. "You guys look like a bunch of bulls just let into the cow pasture," he said in Spanish with a smile. It was true. The men did seem to be more happy than normal. "Did you just find more work or are you celebrating Good Friday a bit early this year?"

The men laughed at his crude metaphor but they understood bulls and cow pastures very well. Good Friday in some of the smaller communities was often celebrated with much drinking, the men usually starting early in the day and carrying on well into the next, hence the priest's question.

One of the men spoke up. He was thin with sharp eyes. The long hair on his mustache and beard was sparse and unkempt. It gave him a bit of a piratical air which he used to great effect. Father Juan remembered his last name was Sanchez but could not remember his first name.

"Neither, Padre," Sanchez said. "We were just celebrating the loss of our jobs, not new ones."

"But you are all smiling," said Father Juan, "and your eyes are shining like men full of drink. How can you be looking like this if you just lost your jobs?"

All the men laughed at the priest's description. Many started to speak but Sanchez raised a hand to quiet them. "It is true Padre, we just lost our jobs, but el Jefe, he gave us each a big bonus – in cash – more money than we would have made in a month and all for asking us to *stop* working." This last part Sanchez said with a shake of his head, as if he could not believe what he was

saying. Some of the men shook their heads with him. "It is true, I swear it by all the saints," he said with all the dignity he could muster.

"Well," said Father Juan, "then you have truly been blessed today. Who is this employer so I can pray they will continue to pay you so well to stop working?"

"It was Alvarez Trucking," said Sanchez. "That is who we worked for."

"Hmm," said Father Juan, "Well it is nice of Doña Alvarez to pay you so well," he said, as he privately wondered how Lupé could afford such generosity. Among other things, Father Juan and Emily had helped the widow go over her finances, so he knew she didn't have much money beyond a few holdings in the company.

"Forgive me Padre," said Sanchez. "It was not Doña Alvarez who paid us."

"No" asked the priest? "But I thought 'El Jefe' was Señor Alvarez?"

"Oh no, Padre," said Sanchez. "*Don Alvarez* owned the company but our boss, El Jefe, was Señor Doyle. He's the one who paid us. In fact you just missed him. He came to the bank with that tall skinny gringo, Señor Meyers, to buy his land. He brought in a big bag of cash, a big bag. You should have seen the eyes on the bank manager when Jefe opened that bag." He held up his hands to form a circle the size of a dinner plate with his fingers. "His eyes were this big! No. Bigger!"

All the men laughed and nudged each other at this description. This was a story they would be telling each other over beers for quite some time.

"¿Verdad?" Father Juan asked.

"Si," said Sanchez. "It is true."

The men nodded their heads and then laughed. Father Juan could not tell if they were laughing more at their good fortunes or at the actions of their crazy boss.

Father Juan was stunned. When Montoya Consuello lay bleeding in the parish hall, way back in November, he had told Father Juan that his boss, "El Jefe" was moving drugs. Since Father Juan knew Montoya worked for Alvarez Trucking, the priest had assumed "El Jefe" meant Antonio. That was why he had contacted Lieutenant Dellarosa and suggested he check out Alvarez business. Now he just realized he had made a mistake, a big one.

"Are you okay Father," Sanchez asked?

Father Juan gave his head a shake. "Si," he said. "I'm just sad I missed talking with Señor Doyle. I wanted to congratulate him on his purchase. Now you said

he bought the land from Señor Meyers?”

“Si, Padre.”

“And paid for it with cash?”

“Si, Padre, lots of cash.”

“Excellent,” the priest said with false happiness. “I will be sure to call on him and congratulate him on his new found wealth. Just like I will congratulate you men now for the blessings God has given you.” Father Juan made the sign of the cross over the men who stood there stunned, as if they could not believe their good luck.

As he walked away, he could hear the men talking loudly. Apparently a blessing from Padre Muerte was even more of a gift than the money Paul Doyle had just given them. For some reason this made Father Juan smile.

As he walked into the bank, Father Juan could tell something had just happened. The air had a tension to it that he could feel. There were two tellers open. On a hunch Father Juan chose the girl on the right because she was a Latina. “Can I help you?” the girl said with her face neutral, professional.

“I heard there was quite a commotion here,” Father Juan said quietly in Spanish, his tone conspiratorial. He spoke low enough that the other teller could not overhear.

The girl’s eyes got larger for a second, “Si, Padre” she responded under her breath in the same language. “Some hombre brought in a large bag of money. I thought my boss was going to have a heart attack when he saw it.” Her cheeks dimpled as she remembered his response.

In a louder voice and switching to English she asked, “Did you need something Father?”

Father Juan held up his check. “Yes, Miss,” he said at the same volume. “I would like to deposit this into my account.”

It wasn’t until Father Juan was halfway home that he realized he had forgotten to close his bank account or to cash his check. For some reason this felt right to him, as if he was finally doing the right thing.

## Chapter 61

As soon as he got home, Father Juan picked up the phone and called Lieutenant Dellarosa using the man's office number. The police receptionist passed on his call without comment and within seconds the lieutenant was one the line.

"This is Dellarosa," he said with the habit of long practice.

"Hola, Marco," Father Juan said. "It is Father Juan."

"Hey," said the lieutenant with surprise in his voice. "Last time I heard, you were still behind bars."

"Ain't a jail built," Father Juan said in a bad James Cagney impersonation, "that can hold a man like me, copper."

Both men laughed at this.

"Seriously," said the lieutenant, "It's good to hear your voice. I thought you might be in for a while. Why did they let you out?"

"You know," said the priest, "I don't have the foggiest idea. They just handed me my things last Sunday and let me go."

"That's strange," said the cop. "Normally the DA will hold a man until his hearing at the very least. I wonder why they let you go."

"It's a mystery," said the priest, "but while I have you on the line I want to confess something to you."

"You? Confess? Is that a joke?"

Father Juan laughed. "Okay, amigo, poor choice of words." Before the lieutenant could interrupt he continued, "You remember when I told you about Alvarez, that he might be moving drugs?"

"The confession from dead guy, not the guy you killed; the guy who died in your church, that what you mean?"

"Yep," Father Juan said with a wince, "Montoya Consuello. That's him."

"Sure," said the lieutenant. "What about him?"

"Well it appears I made a mistake. Consuello told me his jefe was going to be moving a lot of coke. I assumed he meant Alvarez since he worked for his company. I just found out that El Jefe was not Alvarez but another man, the guy who was his manager, Paul Doyle. And get this, just today Paul Doyle walked into a bank in Dimmit and paid for a real estate transaction in cash; as in a huge pile of cash."

“Really,” said Dellarosa. “That’s not normal. Do you think the bank will report a cash transfer of that size?”

“Hard to say,” said the priest. “Doyle is well respected. He was the basketball coach until recently and he looks like a Texan.”

“Are you telling me,” asked the lieutenant, “that he’s a gringo?”

“Si.”

“Hmm, said the lieutenant to himself. “That should be easy to check up on. A cash transaction like that should make a lot of noise. Let me make a few calls and get back to you. Is that okay?”

“Sure,” said Father Juan. “That’s fine.”

“Can I call you at the parish?”

“No,” the priest said too quickly, “not there. Better try my home line.”

“Oh,” said the lieutenant, “that bad huh?”

“Si,” Father Juan said with a sigh, “that bad.”

“Okay buddy, I’ll get right on it. Call you in a few... and Father, if it’s any...”

“Thanks,” interrupted the priest before the man could say more, “but I’m good.”

“Really?”

“Really,” said Father Juan gruffly, hanging up. He hated pity.

Father Juan sat around the house waiting for the lieutenant’s call. After a while he got tired of sitting so he got down on his knees to pray. The past few weeks of emotional turmoil were beginning to catch up with him and before he knew it, he had fallen asleep.

Father Juan dreamed. He dreamed he was on a large plain. It was flat as far as the eye could see and sunny. Green plants grew all around him. It was a field of some kind, wheat, rye. He didn’t know; some kind of grain. The plants were as tall as his chest and covered the land, swaying together under the slightest breeze like waves upon the ocean.

Then suddenly he could feel a change. The sky turned darker, the air dryer. The grain began to turn tan, then brown. All around him the plants sickened and



fell over. It was not the dryness of harvest but one of disease, death. He could feel the land losing its health, feel the grain dying out unused, uneaten. He was laying on his back, the grain now brown and twisted, curling up on itself, leaning over him, blocking his view of the brown sky.

Then a woman approached. It was his mother, only it wasn't the mother he knew but the perfect version of his mother, the mother without sin, the one he saw in his vision when he talked to the curandera for the second time. She leaned over him, dark hair flowing around her slowly like she was underwater. She had a smile on her lips and her eyes flashed with the humor of some inside joke only she could know.

"Mijo," she whispered to him softly. "It is time." He wasn't sure if it was her voice he heard or if it was the sound of the wind blowing thought the dead grain.

Father Juan wanted to talk to her. He wanted to ask her why she had made him a priest, why she had stuck him here in this life but he could not speak, could not move. He tried to say something, anything.

"Mumugh, Ughmuugh."

"It's time, mijo," she said again softly, beautiful eyes sparkly. "It's time to wake up."

Father Juan sat up with a jerk. "Emily!" he cried in a sudden panic, the need to warn her heavy inside him like a huge weight on his chest. "I have to warn Emily."

When the panic subsided he noticed the phone was ringing. He had fallen asleep while praying. He reached over and snatched the phone off the cradle and thrust it up near his head. "What," he said peevishly. "Ow!" In his haste, he had smacked the phone into his ear and it stung.

"Dang!" he said, pulling the phone away and then returning it gingerly. It was as close as he could come to using a curse word. "What do you want?"

"Hey, Father Juan. Catch you at a bad time?"

It was Lieutenant Dellarosa calling him back.

"Uh, no," said the priest with a wince. "Sorry about that. I just drifted off and the phone surprised me."

"Well, I didn't mean to wake you," said the cop.

"It's okay Marco. It was a nightmare anyway."

"Hmm," said the cop, "well in that case I have some news for you. Good

news.”

“You do,” asked the priest sheepishly.

“Sure. You know your friend Doyle? Well I just did some searching on him and you were right. He did suddenly pay for a piece of real estate, in cash.”

“Good. Does that mean you’ll pick him up?”

“Not so fast,” said the lieutenant. “We can’t just arrest a man for having a lot of cash.”

“You did me,” said the priest, “and it wasn’t even mine.”

“Yes, but that was only in the midst of an investigation. We can’t just pick Doyle up without more data. We have to investigate.”

“Okay, so investigate.”

“Believe me, we will. This guy Doyle has been doing petty crime all over the U.S. His record looks like that of a con man but this is the first time he has ever done anything this big. It’ll take a while but I think we can nail him.”

“How long is a while?”

“Oh, you know, a few weeks, maybe a month.”

“A month,” said Father Juan? “But that’s not good enough. He’s planning on marrying someone, a friend of mine. I can’t let that happen.”

“Well then, tell her what you told me. If she is smart enough to be your friend, she’ll know how to deal with him.”

Oh, she’s smart alright,” said Father Juan. “She’s the one I told you about, the one that drew a pistol on Dale Young, the hit man.”

“Ah, that one,” the lieutenant said with a laugh. “If that’s her normal response, then she’ll do okay. I’m sure of it.”

Father Juan felt the tension leave his chest. “I’m sure you’re right,” he said.

“Of course, I’m right,” replied the lieutenant. “By the way, did I tell you I looked into your record too?”

“You did,” asked the priest? “What’d you find?”

“Well it looks like they only had two pieces of evidence against you, the money in your car and your finger prints on the bag of coke.”

“Yes?”

“Well, when they ran a test on the money, it came back negative, no fingerprints, no DNA, nothing. The only link they had was a tip.”

“Doyle,” said Father Juan.

“What,” said the lieutenant?

“When I came to the parish that day, Doyle was in the office with Father Jacob. He must have told Father Jacob something because right after that Father Jacob asked me to wait around the church, which I did. He must have been waiting for the police to come by and search my car. The only one who could have told him about the money was Doyle.”

“Well, that does fit,” said the lieutenant, “and he does appear to have the cash. Where do you suppose he got it from?”

“Beat’s me,” said Father Juan. “He was always complaining about not getting paid enough back when he was a coach. Having a huge pile of money all of a sudden seems pretty suspicious, to me.”

“Yep,” said the cop. “That’s usually what we look for.”

“So is that why they let me go?” asked Father Juan.

“It sure looks like it. With no evidence to link you to the cash, besides sitting in an unlocked car, there’s not much of a case.”

“Even with all the coke they found,” asked the priest?

“Even so,” said the lieutenant.

“Wow. I would think they would hold a guy a bit longer if they connected him to a couple of tons of coke. I guess the laws are different here in Texas.”

“I’m sorry,” said the lieutenant. “How much coke did you say there was?”

“Hmm,” said the priest, “At least a ton, probably two. I don’t know. There were a lot of bags and it was pretty dark. It took me a while to move it all, over an hour.” Father Juan paused for a moment. “Say,” he asked. “How much coke did they find anyway?”

“Just a few small bags.” said the cop. “A little over an ounce.”

“An ounce, is that all?” asked Father Juan. “Where’s the rest?”

“Now that’s a good question, Father. Where *is* the rest?”

Both men thought for a moment then suddenly Father Juan started to laugh.

“What’s so funny, Padre?” asked the lieutenant.

“Isn’t it obvious?” said the priest. “I’m pretty sure I know exactly where Doyle came up with the cash.”

“Duh,” said the cop. “Yes. It’s obvious. Well that certainly makes things much

more interesting from this end. I think we might even be able to shift more resources onto his case if the narcotics guys get involved.”

“Well, that’s good news,” said the priest. “Do you suppose they’ll arrest him this weekend?”

“Are you kidding? On a Friday afternoon, before a major holiday, detectives in the office at this time are as rare as hen’s teeth. Anyone with a brain or ambition has already left for the weekend. The soonest we’ll be able to get someone to this case is Monday, probably Tuesday.”

“Dang,” said the priest.

“What,” asked Lieutenant Dellarosa?

“It’s just,” Father Juan said, “My friend, his fiancé, I’d like to warn her.”

“Do you think you can do it without tipping him off?”

“Hmm,” said the priest. “Haven’t thought about that.”

“Well, do,” said the lieutenant. “One wrong word and this Doyle character is gone. Understand?”

“Sure,” said the priest.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s left already. Most con men do after a huge take.”

“They do?” asked the priest.

“Sure,” said the lieutenant. “Look. Don’t do anything stupid around this character, okay?”

“Who, me?”

“Yes, you,” said the lieutenant. “Every time you go off on your own, I have to send a squad out after you with a body bag. Do you think maybe you could not kill anyone this time, Father, as a favor for me?”

“Are you being serious?” asked the priest.

“Yes, damn it,” said the cop. After a pause he added, “Well, yes and no. You know what I mean.”

“Okay,” said the priest with a laugh, “sure, as a favor to you, but nobody else.”

## Chapter 62

*(Good Friday Evening, 4/22)*

As soon as Father Juan got off the phone with Lieutenant Dellarosa, he dialed Emily's home number. The line was answered by her machine. Father Juan remembered the lieutenant's advice about not warning Paul so he decided not to leave a message. Any message he left might make Paul suspicious. He didn't want to take that risk.

His next call was to Lisa Hoffman. She answered her cell phone on the third ring. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't hang up on your blocked ass?" she answered in a sassy voice.

Father Juan was flummoxed. "Um, uh... hello," he said?

"You'll have to do better than that," Lisa responded. "My finger's on the button."

"Lisa," Father Juan managed. "I need to talk to your mother."

Dead silence.

"Lisa," the priest asked, "are you there?"

"Father Juan?" she said, her tone rising. "Oh, my God! I just said ass to a priest! Ahhh, I did it again!"

"Lisa," Father Juan shouted impatiently, wondering how teen-aged girls lived long enough to become women. "It's important!"

After a pause, Lisa sheepishly said, "I'm sorry Father Juan. I didn't know it was you. When I saw the number was blocked I thought it was Billy calling, and I..."

"It's okay," the priest said. "I'm sorry to surprise you like this but I need to find your mother. It's important. Do you know where she's at?"

"Hmm," Lisa said. "Did you try the house?"

"Yes."

"Did you try the church?"

"No, but I didn't think she'd be there this late on a Friday," the priest said.

"Well... She's been spending a lot of time with Paul." The way she said the name Paul made it clear she thought the name a curse word. "Did you try calling

him?”

Paul was the last person he wanted to call but he couldn't tell her that. “Look,” he said, trying to sound casual, “if you happen to run into her, just ask her to give me a call, will you? It's not really a big deal, I just wanted to ask her something.”

“Uh, sure, Father,” she said. “I'll let her know.”

“And Lisa,” Father Juan added.

“Yes?”

“Do me a favor and don't let Paul know I called, will you?”

“Ooh, *that* I can do for you,” she said with a smile in her voice. Teenagers, Father Juan had noticed, love to be included in mysteries.

“Thank you, your royal evilness,” Father Juan said.

“You're welcome, jailbird,” was her response.

Father Juan laughed as he hung up.

## Chapter 63

Not sure what to do, Father Juan sat down at his table and thought. He needed to warn Emily but not in a way that would tip off Paul. Finally he decided to write her a note and slip it in her mail box. That would be discrete and afford him some privacy. The problem was he didn't know what to write. “Your fiancé is a criminal mastermind” just didn't sound right. Grabbing a notepad, an envelope and a pen, he decided he would think of something on the way over.

He got to his truck, started it up and drove off for Emily's place. The sun was just starting to set, sitting a handbreadth above the flat horizon. Long thin clouds stretched off in tendrils, all running north to south. They caught the setting sun and lit up the sky with wonderful oranges and reds. Father Juan started to make his turn onto the highway and the beauty of the sky stopped him cold. He kept glancing around at the horizon. The low hanging clouds near the horizon matched the ones overhead but in a deeper and darker range. The few trees he could see were scattered and far enough away to give him an

almost unobstructed view of the sky. Only one tree stood out and it was due north of him. It was the big oak at the old Seller's place, the one right near the mystery pump, the place he had been drawn to several times, the place where he met the old curandera.

He looked at the tree again. It was so large, so domineering that it seemed to stand up into the sky, demanding its own share of the sunset. The golden tones of the fading light gave it a magical glow, almost as it appeared in his vision of the perfect spring; that strange perfect place the old witch had taken him to. Down near the bottom of the trunk he saw a reflection flash once and then again. It was far enough away and so dark that he could not tell but it looked like a car was parked down at its base.

Just then his thoughts were interrupted by the loud blaring of a car horn. Father Juan turned around to find two cars stuck behind him. He had been sitting at the intersection so engrossed in thought that he hadn't heard them come up. Waving a hand by way of apology, Father Juan turned right onto the highway and started down the road but his eye kept falling back to the place at the base of the tree. He kept glancing back at the tree as it slowly slipped further and further behind. Finally Father Juan realized he wasn't paying attention to where he was going. This is silly he said to himself. He pulled over to the side of the road, checked the road carefully and then did a U-turn. Figuring it was easier to drive to the old Seller's place than crash, because he was curious, he sped back down the highway and turned North onto the old dirt road.

The sun had just dropped under the horizon when he pulled up next to the tree. He was not surprised to find Emily's truck parked nearby, driver side door open, keys in the ignition. When he got out he found her standing next to the old pump, facing away from him, into the remnants of the setting sun and holding down low near her leg, a beer bottle by the neck. Her silhouette looked dark, lonely and sad.

Father Juan quietly walked up to her and stood to one side. He said nothing, not wishing to disturb her. She was facing the pump, never lifting her eyes from it. It was running again, impossibly so, the sound making a deep churning noise in the still air. The air was still, calm and warm. He could hear the sound of birds, crickets and even the occasional car down at the highway. A steady drip, drip, drip of condensation fell from the big exit pipe on the side of the pump. The ground below it was dark with the spreading moisture. The short wires still ran from the big motor and dropped off to one side. Spider webs covered their shape but not their ends which were the cloudy murky verdigris color of copper long exposed to the elements.

Emily lifted the beer to her lips and took a swallow. "I broke up with him, you know," she said not looking at him but acknowledging his presence for the first time.

"You did?" Father Juan asked. "Why?"

She gave a shrug, still looking into the sunset. "I don't know. Lot of reasons, I guess. None of them very..."

"Good?" Father Juan suggested.

"Sure. Good," she said, her tone unconvinced.

"What happened," he asked?

"Huh," she said. It was a grunt, not a question. "I took him to visit the family plot, you know, at the cemetery. I made a little picnic, of it, a nice afternoon meal." She stopped to take another swig of beer.

"Yes," he said. "Go on."

"He didn't laugh or anything but I could tell he thought it was silly. Quaint," she said this last word like it was distasteful. She took another sip. "You know what he said when I showed him the spot for me? He said, 'Baby we can get a better spot than this. We can get us a big stone in some fancy place like New York or something.'"

She stopped, disgust was obvious in her tone. Father Juan put his arm around her shoulder and stood at her side facing the same dull orange of twilight. He didn't need to say a word. He understood perfectly.

She brought up her arm for another swig but the bottle by this time was empty. When she realized there was no more beer to be had, she whirled the bottle viciously at the pump. It shattered into a hundred pieces. Unfazed, the pump continued chugging away.

"I hate that damn pump," she said low, almost a growl. Suddenly she turned and headed unsteadily for her truck. "Hey," she said brightly to him behind her back, "Wanna beer?"

"Uh, sure," said Father Juan, not feeling sure at all. She lifted the lid on a cooler in the bed of her truck and started rummaging around inside. He could hear the ice slosh about as she pulled out two bottles. They were dripping with small pieces of ice clinging to their sides. She deftly removed their tops with a blade on her pocket knife and then handed him one. It was ice cold. "How many of those have you had?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. "Four, maybe six."



“Hmm,” he said, not sure how to suggest it without making her mad. “Do you think maybe you’ve had enough?”

She stopped suddenly and held up the bottle to her face, swaying on her heels back and forth just a bit, staring at the bottle like she was trying to glean some important archaeological mystery from the label on the side. Then with a casual wave, she tossed the mostly full bottle into the field.

“I guess so,” she said. “Come on,” she added as she suddenly started walking into the field.

“Where are we going?” he asked as he hurried to catch up, the beer almost forgotten in his hand.

She pointed ahead to the warehouse dimly visible in the fading light. “Up there,” she said.

“Oh.”

“Did you know he tried to buy my place?” she asked as he tried to catch up.

“No,” he said.

“Said he was going to build something,” she said, with a slight slur to her voice, “something special, but he wouldn’t tell me. It was supposed to be a surprise, said he was going to tell me on our wedding day.”

“And...” he asked, not sure why she was telling him this.

She stopped suddenly and turned to look him in the eye. It was so unexpected, he almost ran into her. “Did you know,” she said, eyes gleaming with intent, “he bought the Meyer place?”

“Well, I heard that...” Father Juan said but she had already started walking again, not listening.

“There it is,” she said as they stood outside the warehouse, the large number 8 over their heads. “Come on,” she said as she locked her arm in his and pulled him around the side of the building and up to the front door.

Unlike the last time he had come, both the light over the front door and the interior lights were on. The huge doors over the loading bays were closed but the front door was wide open. He could see bugs flying into the cone of light over the door. Father Juan stopped just short of the entrance. “Do you think this is such a good idea?” he asked.

She stopped her headlong rush long enough to look at him. “Sure,” she said. “After all my fiancé or is that ex-fiancé owns the place.”

“He does?” Father Juan asked in surprise.

“Yep, bought it from Lupé last week. Paid cash for it, the trucks, the warehouse, the business, the whole caboodle, doodle, doodle.”

“Sure,” said the priest. “It’s just, the last time I came here, somebody died.”

Emily turned to look him in the eye. “It's okay,” she said. “I won’t kill him.” With that she turned and walked inside.

Father Juan stayed where he was, mindful of the lieutenant’s warning. After a moment, Emily stuck her head back out the door. “You coming or what?” she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders and followed her inside.

## Chapter 64

The inside of the warehouse was bright and clean. So clean it looked almost brand new. The long tables now shiny, their stainless steel tops scrubbed until they reflected the ceiling like mirrors. Emily was walking down a row, towards the back. She was heading towards the place where the water pipe entered the warehouse, where the stairwell to the small room lay. Father Juan followed at a slower pace. He knew the alcohol would give her energy for a while but then she would crash. He hoped he could get her out of the place while she still had the energy to stand and before someone noticed them.

Emily had marched up to the doorway over the stairwell and looked up over the door jamb. There she saw a small owl statue with the glowing red eyes; it was the strange lock to the door he had told her about, only he didn’t have the key. She reached up to touch it. “It's real, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he said.

“When you told me, I, I wasn’t sure,” she continued. “It sounded so much like your dream by the well, you know with that strange old lady...”

“The curandera,” he said.

“Yes, her, the witch. It sounded so much like your story that I thought... I thought...”

“You thought it was made up?”

“Yah. I guess. I’m sorry.”

Father Juan let out a sigh. “Is that why you called the police?” he asked.

“Huh?” she said, turning around suddenly and looking at him. “Police? Is that what you think?”

Trying to keep the bitterness from his voice, he answered, “Well I did find it odd that a week after I told you about this place, the Sheriff arrived at my house with a search warrant.”

Her hand went to her face and all the color drained from it. “Oh my God,” she said. “I never thought...” She started to walk over to him, to put her arms around him. Her movement caused him involuntarily flinch and go stiff, arms at his sides like a corpse. This stopped her as surely as if he had slapped her. Indecision filled her face, made her raise her arms. She wanted to touch him, to sooth him but she also didn’t want to hurt him. Tears formed under her eyes and dripped silently down her cheeks. Finally, she raised one hand and slowly, gently caressed the side of his face with the back of her fingers. He closed his eyes, the touch burning his skin like an electric shock. It felt powerful. It felt wonderful. It felt earthy, human, and it was entirely the wrong thing to feel, for a priest.

He gently pulled his head away from her touch and opened his eyes. He could feel the beginning of tears starting to form so he turned his head to distract himself. Without thinking, he reached out and pulled on the door handle to the stairwell. To his surprise the door was unlocked. It opened in his hand without a noise.

The two turned and faced the doorway. Dark stairs led down to the room below. A faint reddish glow came from a light source they could not see. It cast a faint light to the edges of the stairs which were otherwise completely black. As if in a trance, the two friends held hands and slowly walked down the stairs.

The room below was small, maybe 10 feet by 12 feet and was empty save for a small table, two chairs and some kind of low bed; a pallet with thin sheets and a colorful blanket. Against the far wall was a shrine to Santa Muerte, just like the one behind Father Juan’s apartment. Several candles burned in front of it, including one large red one. The candles were the only light in the room.

Emily walked over to the shrine to look at the figure of the saint of death. This figure was about two feet tall. She wore a white wedding dress over her skeletal form. She held a scale in one hand and scythe in the other. This figure was different as it was a relief carved out of a larger rectangular piece. Behind the saint carved deeper into the wood were thousands of stars in the night sky. The detail on the stars was incredible, as was the rich flowing hair from the saint's head. Even from halfway across the room Father Juan could see the bones and feathers woven into her tresses. It was a level of detail he had never seen before in a carving. Emily was about to touch the image when Father Juan stopped her. "Don't," he said.

The small bed made a noise, a creak. Emily and Father Juan turned to look at it. As they watched, the blanket folded neatly on the bed suddenly folded over and then over, unfolding itself until it became the dress on the body of an old woman standing before them. The process was fast, like looking at an optical illusion and having it suddenly switch on you; one second you see a blanket, the next an old woman.

Emily gave a small cry but made no other noise. The old woman looked at her sharply but relented when she realized no more sound was coming. When her eyes rested back on Father Juan he quickly bowed his head and said in his best Spanish, "Hello Abuela."

The old woman gave him a warm smile and reached over to pat his cheek. Her action so much like a regular old woman that Father Juan suddenly suspected he had made a mistake – that this was not the curandera from his dreams. When she spoke though, it was with the voice he remembered.

"Hola, Mijo, so nice of you to bring your lady friend. I can see why you would choose her. She is a brave one, she is."

"Thank you Abuela," the priest replied.

"What did she say?" Emily asked. Father Juan spared Emily a glance. She was staring at the curandera openly. Respect was plain on her face but she showed no sign of fear.

"You can't hear her?" he asked.

"What I have to say is for you alone, Mijo," the curandera said. "I have allowed her to see me out of respect for you. Do not ask for more."

"I understand, Abuela," Father Juan said with a slight bow. He turned to Emily and he could read the question in her eyes.

"It sounds like Spanish," Emily said, "but with Nahuatl or something else

mixed in.”

“It's... it's something more than that,” he told her. “But I don’t think I have time to translate right now, do I Abuela?” The last part was directed at the curandera. The old woman shook her head in reply, her eyes cold and hard.

Father Juan thought Emily might be upset at being excluded by the old woman so he was surprised when she too bowed her head to her and said in English, “Thank you grandmother.”

The curandera smiled back to her with real warmth and then turned back to the priest, her face again serious. “The time is now, Mijo. You must choose your path. Are you ready?” she asked. Before he could think of a reply she added, “It’s too late for answers. Good bye Mijo. Choose well.”

Before their eyes the old woman slumped down and down until her dress again became a colorful folded blanket on the bed.

Emily let out a small gasp. They both stared at the blanket as if it was alive. Then they heard a creak on the stairs behind them. They spun around quickly. It was Paul. He was walking down the stairs, a bottle in one hand, a gun in the other and his eyes were burning with anger, like the blazing inferno of a sun.

## Chapter 65

“Well, well, well,” Paul said as he swaggered down the stairs, the gun waving back and forth between Emily and the priest. “If it isn’t the bitch and the false priest,” he continued.

There was a slight slur to his voice and a sway to his walk. The bottle, some kind of scotch, was half empty and the brown fluid sloshed around when he walked. When he got to the bottom of the stairs he looked around the room, his eyes showing surprise when he glanced at the candles on the shrine. He then ambled over to the table and slumped down in the chair with its back to the wall. At no time did his gun waiver from either Father Juan or Emily.

“Well,” Paul said. “What do ya think of my plan?”

Emily and Father Juan glanced at each other, unsure what to say. Paul started to look agitated. “You know,” he said. “My plan.”

This time they noticed a map on the small table. They must have overlooked it before. They leaned over a bit to read it. It was a map of Nazareth. The plot lines for all the properties were laid out in a faint ink. In the middle using darker ink was a large complex that covered several pieces of property. It was a large building, or a series of buildings; it was difficult to tell in the low light. Tiny lettering indicated individual squares with names like The Gap and Victoria's Secret. Over the whole area were larger letters saying Doyle Mall Complex.

Father Juan noticed a small area off to the right. It was the Holy Family Parish. Seeing that gave him a sense of scale. The Mall on the map was huge, covering well more than half the town between its shops, parking lots and fountains. The more he looked at it, the more details appeared. Ponds the size of lakes surrounded the place. A golf course could be seen off to one side, tiny in comparison to the rest of the site. In the middle of the shops was some kind of park with a football field, fountains, a movie theater and even two roller-coasters.

"Well," Paul said impatiently. "What do you think?"

"It's... It's..." Father Juan said. "It sure is big."

"Yep," Paul said proudly. "It's the biggest mall in America, bigger than anything in New York or LA. Heck, there's nothing this big even in Houston."

"Really?" asked the priest, genuinely surprised.

"Really," said Paul. "And it's my idea. All mine. Oh Antonio helped here and there, and he sure was handy with the financing but the idea is all mine."

Paul beamed at them, proud as any father showing off his newborn son. The gun still lay in his hand but it pointed off to one side, forgotten. Father Juan noticed this and began to inch closer to that side.

"I think it's ugly," Emily said in a loud voice.

Both men looked at her with the same question but with different intent.

"You do?" Paul said in surprise.

"You do?" Father Juan said, thinking this is not the time to be negative.

"Yes," said in a voice full of loathing. "I mean look at the thing. It's huge. It's gross. It covers half the town. It's... It's... It's ugly."

Paul suddenly looked like a boy who had lost his puppy. "Now dear," he said in a whining tone, "Why would you say such a thing about your wedding present?"

"Wedding present?" she said with venom. "I told you, we're not getting married. Don't you remember?"

“Of course, dear,” Paul said. “But that was just a phase. You’ll see. We’re going to put this town on the map, you and I. We’re going to be rich. We’re going to belong to every church and club in the city. We’re going to be somebody.”

“No, *we’re* not!” Emily said in a voice that left no room for misunderstanding. “*We* are not going to do anything of the sort. You might be able to buy half the town but you can’t buy me!”

“Now honey,” Paul was saying, but Father Juan could tell his whining would come to an end soon. “We agreed we needed just a little time before we made any hasty decisions. Don’t you remember?”

“No we didn’t,” Emily spit from between her teeth. “You decided we needed time. I decided I wanted out of your little schemes.”

“But dear, I told you the drugs were just for the seed money. We’ll finance the rest of the capital the proper way. You know that.”

“I only know that you lied to me and that you killed my best friend’s husband.”

Paul’s face took on a nasty look and the spark of anger flashed in his eyes.

The gun swiftly came up, centered on Father Juan. “He’s the son of a bitch who killed Antonio, *my* business partner,” Paul said using the gun to emphasize his point. “He’s the one who ruined all my plans. If I hadn’t had that witch here, he would have ruined this too,” he said placing his other hand on the map.

“The wells,” Father Juan said out of the blue. “Of course, the wells.”

“The what?” Emily said.

“Paul used the curandera to dry up the wells,” he said. “Look at the map, the pattern. We thought it was an ever widening circle but it was just the wells on the property he wanted to buy.”

“I don’t get it,” Emily said. “Why would he make their well go dry if he wanted to buy their land?”

Paul sat at the table, arms crossed, looking smug.

“To give them incentive to sell,” Father Juan said. “You yourself told me the farms here go way back, the people here have roots. People like that aren’t going to sell their family’s land just for money not unless they think their land is no longer useful, can no longer be farmed.” The priest turned to Paul. “Isn’t that right, Paul?”

Paul clapped his hands, “Oh, bravo, bravo. Good work priest. You’re the first

to figure it out. Too bad you'll be the last." As he said this, he lifted the gun and pointed it at Father Juan's heart, his intent clear.

"What," Father Juan felt himself ask calmly, "did she charge you?"

"What?" Paul said, in surprise.

"The witch, the curandera. What did she charge you?"

"What do you mean?"

"For the wells, what did she charge you?" he said, sweat breaking out on his forehead. "She never works for free, that one. She always has a price."

"She told me she needed one ambition for another," Paul said.

"That sounds about right," said the priest. "So what ambition did you, wait! Don't tell me. Let me guess." The priest thought for a moment. "It was being liked, wasn't it? The desire to be loved, you gave that up for the desire to be rich, didn't you?"

Paul's face turned ashen. Father Juan saw the look on his face and laughed. "I was right, wasn't I?" he said.

Paul's face turned from shock to anger. "Who told you?" he spit out.

"No one," Father Juan tauntingly. "Wanna know how I know? It was Emily."

"Emily?" Paul said in surprise.

"Me?" Emily said.

"Yes, Emily," Father Juan said. "She's the most loving person I've ever met, the kindest, the most caring. If she stopped loving you, then it had to be for a reason, a reason separate from her, because she would never stop loving someone, all on her own, never, I know it."

Paul looked stunned, as if he started to grasp the price he had paid for his success. "No," he said. "It can't be. She has to love me."

"It's true," Emily said quietly.

"What?" said Paul.

Emily was looking down at her feet. "It's true," she said. "It's true. I never would have stopped loving you Paul, never. That was how I ended up pregnant with Lisa, how I lost my first husband. I never could stop loving him either, even when I should have. Even when he really needed me too."

"You bitch!" Paul yelled, raging "Don't you dare stop loving me. You have no right!"



The gun went off with a flash. The explosion was shockingly loud in the small room. Emily dropped like a puppet with its strings cut, hands to her belly. Deep red blood welled up from between her fingers.

## Chapter 66

Father Juan was at Emily's side in an instant. He took off his coat and handed it to her, placing it under her hands, using it to apply pressure on her wound, trying to stop the bleeding. Her breath came in ragged gasps, her face already pale from blood loss.

Paul held the gun away from him at arms length, as if it were poisonous, a dangerous animal.

"She's loosing a lot of blood," Father Juan said. "We need to call 911. We need to do it soon. We're a long ways from help."

Paul took this information calmly, as if Father Juan was discussing the weather. Then he looked at the priest with cold calculating eyes and the gun was back pointing at the priest. "It doesn't matter," he said. "As soon as she dies, I'm as good as dead myself, aren't I priest. Or should I call you Angel of Death?"

"What?" said Father Juan. "There's still time. We can save her."

"Oh, I know all about you, Father." Paul continued, his voice bitter. "I did my research carefully with you. People who confess to you, die, but not just anybody. Only those who have committed the vilest of sins are the ones that die. Isn't that right?"

"What?" said Father Juan.

"Don't bother trying to deny it," he said. "I know it is true. The curandera told me. So did Antonio. Funny, but he was the one who first told me. You see he learned about you long before you came here and he was very careful to make sure he was never around you."

"A lot of good it did him," said the priest.

"That's right. You did ruin his plans didn't you? Just like you do with every life you take. The stench of death in on you priest and it makes you smell ugly."

Father Juan turned back to Emily. She was starting to slump in his arms. He could feel her life ebbing away.

“How many does this make priest?” Paul yelled, “How many deaths this time?”

“Four hundred and eight-nine,” said Father Juan quietly.

“That’s right,” said Paul triumphantly. “Four hundred and eighty-nine. I wonder how many lives you’ve ruined? How many children you’ve orphaned? How many wives you widowed?”

“None,” said the priest. “Not a single one.”

“What? said Paul. ”Don’t try to fool me priest. You’re a regular serial killer. I know it.”

“The answer,” said Father Juan between his teeth, anger rising, “is none. I have killed no one, ever!” Father Juan looked back at Emily. He could feel her pulse but it was getting weaker. He didn’t have much time.

“We have to save her,” he said. “She’ll die otherwise.”

“Good,” said Paul. “The ungrateful bitch can die for all I care. And then I can die too. We can all die together.”

Father Juan could feel Emily try to move in his arms. He started to get up but Paul still pointed the gun at him.

“Not so fast, amigo,” Paul said. “I’m afraid I can’t have you running around ruining my death. You’ll get your time with me. I’m sure to confess, once she dies and then you won’t have to worry about either of us, ever again.”

Father Juan could sense he was right. Of the hundreds and hundreds of times he had witnessed a death, he had never once wished it to happen, or wanted to kill. It was always something he tried to avoid at all costs. But here he was, wishing Paul was dead, so he could save Emily.

Then the words of the curandera rang in his ears. “You must chose, Mijo, one ambition or the other.” But what did they mean? What ambition?

Slowly it came to him, like a bubble bursting up from within. His future. His own fate. He had two futures here, one where he was still a priest and the other where he was something else, possibly married to Emily. He knew she loved him and he knew deep down he loved her so that must be his other ambition. Suddenly it all fell into place. He could be a priest or he could be married. Those were his choices. The price for his priesthood was the death of Emily. This made sense to him, in its own twisted way. After all he was bargaining with Saint

Death, logically all of her choices would include death. But what would die if he chose to be married? His mission? His priesthood? His entire life for the past 25 years? All the death, all the suffering, all the moving from church to church because of his strange gift? A gift from Saint Death herself?

What surprised him was not how he felt or which decision he wished to make but how hard it was to think of himself as something other than a priest. He may not have wanted to be a priest at first but he would be lying to himself if he didn't admit he had taken to his calling since then. It was all he knew, all he liked to do, all he had every thought about himself.

Then he remembered it wasn't *all* he liked. There was more to him than that. There were things he liked that weren't a part of being a priest, like basketball, like helping out others even when he wasn't wearing the collar, like thinking about Emily.

This last thought hit his head and suddenly he knew what to do. Without a question, he knew he had made his choice and how he would express it.

Gently, he leaned Emily against the wall, and he began to stand, all six foot four inches of him. He had been gaining weight since he went to jail, fleshing out. At first he thought it was just from a lack of exercise but now he wasn't so sure. He remembered the man he had seen in the mirror in his bathroom many months back, the man who looked like a gang-banger. Maybe that wasn't another man. Maybe it was him, the same man but a man with a different path, the version of himself who had not become a priest. The curandera had said that he was at the crossroads of two different paths. Maybe he could choose to be that man instead of the one he was. Trade in the priest life and all he had known, for the other rougher one, one in which he may lose everything, even all his knowledge, but gain the ability to love Emily.

A smile crossed his face. The other man, the other Jamie Delgado was a bigger man, stronger. A man like that knew what to do on the wrong end of a gun. Father Juan was sure. He only hoped there was enough of this other man, this other Jamie, in himself, to get him through the next few minutes.

"What are you smiling at," Paul said with a frown. "And sit down. I'm not ready for you yet."

"That's too bad," rumbled the voice from Father Juan's chest, the voice of Jamie Delgado. It was deeper, meaner. The voice of someone who could kill a man, not just watch him die. "Because I," said the voice, "am definitely ready for you."

With that he launched himself at Paul. To his surprise, his extra weight did not

slow him down. His extra strength however was a definite plus.

The gun went off with a flash, the report loud again but this time not as effective. He was used to that sound. He felt the bullet punch a hole in his side, near the very edge, just through the skin. Not bad, he thought as he dived across the room.

He smashed into the table and then into Paul. The little man had been leaning almost against the wall and the alcohol made his reactions slow. The table hit Paul like a ton of bricks while the 250 extra pounds of angry bleeding human flesh smashed into his chest like a freight train.

The impact of Paul's back against the wall, whiplashed his head into it with a loud crack, a split second later. Before Paul could get up, before he could fire another shot, even before the bottle of scotch hit the floor, Father Juan/Jaime Delgado, was standing on the ground and pounding Paul's face with his fists. Ignoring the gun, Juan/Jamie pounded his head and chest again and again. All the rage, all the frustration, a lifetime of being branded a dangerous man for a crime he did not commit, filled up his world, and powered his fists.

Paul's face crumbled with the onslaught. His head was bloody but hammered so hard it didn't have time to bleed. He tried to work his legs, to flea, to do anything but there was nothing he could do to stop the furious assault.

Finally the gun went off a third time. Father Juan (or was it Jamie Delgado?) felt the bullet ricochet up through his chest. That was bad, very bad. He looked up at the ceiling as his vision blackened around the edges. Unable to move his head, he fell slowly to one side watching the ceiling become the wall and the wall become the floor. He hit the ground with a thud which he felt but could not hear. He blinked his eyes to clear them and saw he was facing the shrine, the glow from the candles fading as his vision grew dim. He reached out a hand. "Please," he said. "Please." He saw the flame from the single red candle flicker and then go out. A puff of smoke from its flame climbed lazily in the fading light. Then the world around him turned black and he was gone.

## Chapter 67

*(Easter Sunday, 4/24)*

The first thing he noticed was the smell. The vinegary scent of disinfectant mixed with the tang of a fresh hospital sheet. He heard a beeping, as if from a great distance, a single tone pulsing on and off, on and off. Heart, he thought. Yes, heart. His heart beat.

Next came a feeling of weight on his chest, crushing weight, as if someone had casually left an elephant leaning up against him. It made it difficult to breathe, difficult to swallow. He labored to force the air in, to make his chest expand. Later he would realize it wasn't weight he was feeling but pain. Pain held in check by morphine. That would be later, after the morphine faded and the weight remained. Right now it was just a weight.

Finally, he could sense the light coming in his eyes. Even with his lids closed it seemed bright. When he opened them, it was worse. The morphine made his vision blur and made it difficult to track things, objects in the room seemed to move around him on their own volition.

His thoughts moved slowly through his brain like they were swimming in honey. They were strangely detached from any emotion; bright clean, pure logic. No feeling at all.

A face swam into view. He looked at it. It was Lisa. Lisa Hoffman. She was shouting something but he couldn't hear her, like his ears were stuffed with cotton. She was excited, happy. She kept turning around and saying something out loud, talking to someone he could not see, and then looking back at him. She grabbed his hand and held it tight. That felt good. He could feel the emotion of that.

With that emotion came another. It bubbled up through the honey of his brain, slowly, ever so slowly. He opened his mouth but no sound came out. He worked his tongue and lips, moved them around like he was warming his muscles up for an Olympic event. Then he tried again.

"Emily," he whispered. Lisa could not hear him over her own shouting. He could feel the thought still in his head. The emotion still attached. It was urgent. He tried again, this time with more force, squeezing feebly on her hand to add emphasis.

"Emily," he said. This time Lisa heard him.

"What?" she asked, putting her ear close to his lips.

He tried one last time, more croak than whisper. "Emily?" he asked.

"She's fine, she's fine," she said." They have her in the next room. She's..."

Lisa was speaking more but he couldn't hear her. The edges of the room grew

dark. He saw a strange woman lean over him, looking at something behind him. She looked down into his eyes and said something he couldn't hear. She was a nurse. He was in a hospital. These ideas floated across his head. Then the room went dark.

"She's fine," was his last thought before the dark closed in.

## Chapter 68

*(Sunday, 5/1, Divine Mercy Sunday)*

Jaime Delgado was sitting up in bed, watching the sports channel. The first round of conference level playoffs had just finished up for the NBA and the second round, the semi finals, would begin tonight. The talking heads on the TV were describing the teams and their relative strengths and weaknesses. He found their talk boring, like listening to someone describe the menu rather than giving him a meal. He wanted to see the action. He wanted the meat.

A middle aged, middle sized Latino walked into the room. He was wearing jeans and a casual polo shirt. His dark hair was disheveled, sprinkled with a healthy mixing of grey. He was holding a folded newspaper under his right arm and he walked into the room with a weary look, searching. His dark eyes met Jaime's and he smiled.

"Father Juan," the man said. "Good to see you up and around."

"Thank you Lieutenant," Jaime said, searching his memory for the man's name. Then he had it, "Marco," he said. "It's good to finally be able to sit up. You know, I almost didn't recognize you without a suit."

"Yes," said Lieutenant Dellarosa, "sometimes we cops like to dress like real people, just to shake things up."

"You mean y'all don't sleep in a cheep blue suit?" Jaime said with a humorous tone.

"Only on weekdays," the cop replied with equal humor. "Say, I heard they got you pretty patched up."

Jaime leaned back while Dellarosa pulled up a chair.

"They just took me out of ICU yesterday," Jaime said, "so I don't know all

that's gone on. Apparently I slept through most of the fun. The doctor says the bullet, the second bullet, bounced around pretty good inside but managed to miss the major stuff. I'll be on serious antibiotics for some time and they're worried my digestive tract might leak a bit but otherwise they tell me I just need to heal up enough so I can get the hell out of here."

"There were two bullets?"

"Yep, the first one just pinched the skin here," he said as he pulled up the hospital gown far enough to show the small bandages on his right side just above the hip. "The second one entered near my bladder and stopped up against my shoulder blade." He reached up with his left hand to pat his right shoulder. "Hurts like holy hell when I raise my arm up higher than my head but the doc says that's just the bruise."

"I see," said the lieutenant, his face getting serious.

Jaime looked at him carefully. "I don't like it when cops get all serious around me. What is it? Spit it out, Marco."

"Well Father, it's just that you seem different somehow, changed."

"Meaning..."

"Meaning... Well, for starters, I've never heard you curse before but just now you've done it twice."

"Ah. That," said Jaime with a tone of resignation.

"Yes. That," said the lieutenant. "A good cop gets to where he notices things, details. He can tell when something's not right; something has changed. I could tell right off you look different but that's to be expected after a week in the hospital but I can tell you're acting different too. And frankly, Father, it worries me."

The sports commentators were still talking in the distance.

"Hold on," Jaime said as he reached over and turned off the TV. "Sorry about that," he continued. "A damn nuisance that thing. Where were we? Oh yes. Changed." Jaime leaned back and gathered his thoughts.

"First off, it's Jaime Delgado, not Father Juan. Jaime is my given name, the one I was born with. Father Juan is..." He looked around the room for a second, think. "Well... Look," he continued. "What would you say if I told you that a man can change? Change his life, like changing the channel on the TV," he said while holding up the TV remote for emphasis. "One minute you're on one channel and the next minute, click, you're on another."

The cop looked up suspiciously. "I'm sorry Father, Jaime, but I find that hard to believe? Frankly, it sounds like bullshit to me, if you pardon my language."

"Does it?" asked Jaime. "Is it any stranger than a priest who causes the guilty to confess, and then to die?"

"Well..."

"See? I know you're good at figuring things out and I won't try and tell you different but you have to admit that some things simply do not fit in with the real world. Call them miracles, call them science, call them whatever you wish. One hundred years ago, a .22 up the gut was a death sentence. Yet today I am alive and well. Is that a miracle? Is that science? Or is it a little of both?"

"Okay," said the cop, "so the regular rules don't always apply. I can buy that, especially in your case. But I'm suspicious, if you don't mind me saying so. I don't like it when the answers are too neat, too easy."

"Good," replied Jaime. "Cause I could use a friend who doesn't like the easy answers. I like to think God is not interested in excuses but in results and I hate, hate, hate it when my personal life starts to sound like an excuse. When it's too pat, too easy, as you call it."

"You do?" Dellarosa said with surprise.

"Sure. Don't you?"

"Uh... I guess I do," said the cop.

"Yep the unexamined life, and all that," Jaime said. "Look. Tell you what. Why don't you tell me what you know and then I'll fill in where I can? I take it you've been busy for the past week while I've been napping."

"You can say that," said the cop dryly.

"Well, what did you find?"

"Well, we dug into Doyle's past, thanks to you. By the way, you do know he's dead. Right?"

"Yes," Jaime said sadly. "Yes I know."

"You're sad?" Dellarosa asked.

"Sure. He was a friend. Not a very good one in the end, but still..."

"I see," said the cop. "Anyway, we pulled out his record and found all kinds of fun stuff: bribery, extortion, petty theft. But you knew this anyway. I told you this, the day he shot you."

"Yes. Go on."



“So when we found you all in the warehouse, we started searching around a bit, checked his business records, his apartment, that sort of thing.

“And...”

“Well in his apartment, we struck pay dirt. He had a whole room full of coke, almost a ton of it in fact. Some of it with your finger prints still on it.”

Jaime smiled. “See. I told you there was a lot of it.”

“You were right. We also found a pile of cash, about a million dollars, all in small bills. That much cash takes up a lot of space you know?”

“Too well, amigo, all too well.”

“Anyway, it was while we were looking through the money that we hit the mother load. Get this. You’ll not believe it. He left a diary.”

“A what?”

“I kid you not,” Dellarosa continued, “He left behind a diary. It had everything, every detail. It was crazy. The DA looked at it and I swear she almost cried.”

“That good, huh?”

“Oh, it was beautiful. Every detail. How he came up with the idea for the mall. You knew about that right?”

“Oh, yes,” Jaime said with certainty.

“That’s right. Miss Hoffman told us. Anyway, Doyle wrote about talking his boss, Alvarez, into funding the mall with drug money. I guess he told Alvarez they would need only a small shipment and then behind his back ordered a whole lot more.”

“Well, that explains Antonio’s anger,” Jaime said.

“What?”

“The night he died,” Jaime said, “Antonio was angry. More like pissed off. We’re talking raging.”

“Yes, well I can see why. Doyle wrote that Antonio was expecting to move about twenty pounds but Doyle had ordered over a ton. I guess Alvarez’s old contacts were happy to advance him more product in hopes he would get back in the game, not knowing that it wasn’t Alvarez they were communicating with but Doyle.”

“Oooo,” said Jaime. “No wonder Antonio was upset.”

“Yep,” said the cop nodding his head. “I can see that.”

The men both nodded, gathering their thoughts. Jamie finally asked, "Was there anything else?"

"Just this," Dellarosa said as he handed Jaime the folded up newspaper. "I thought you might like a copy."

Jaime folded out the newspaper, careful to not raise his right arm too high. The front page had a headline in large print.

### **Father Death Foils Drug Cartel.**

#### **Not Guilty, Says DA**

Jaime looked at the headline for a second and then back at the lieutenant. "Do I really want to read this?" he asked.

"Probably not," said Dellarosa with a smile.

"Good," said Jaime. "Thank you for giving it to me and I suppose one day I'll appreciate it more, but right now..."

"Right now you've got other things on your mind?" offered the cop.

"Si, exactly," said Jaime.

"Okay," said Dellarosa after a moment. "Suppose you fill me in on the rest."

"Well," said Jaime, "as far as the legal stuff goes, there's not much to say. You know about the drugs and you know why he was selling them. I suppose you know about the wells."

"Miss Hoffman did tell us something, something about Doyle hiring a bruja to make the wells go dry."

"Not a bruja, a curandera. There's a difference."

"There is?" the lieutenant asked.

"Yes. It has to do with spiritual matters. But I gather none of that means much as spiritual matters are not considered the kind of evidence admissible in a court of law."

"No, they are not," the lieutenant said with finality. Then after a moment he added, "Is this thing, this thing that has to do with you a spiritual matter?"

"You could say that," said Jaime.

"I just did," said the lieutenant.

"Well yes, back to that," said Jaime. "I'll try to make this brief, the condensed version as it were."

The lieutenant leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "Shoot," he said.

“I’m all ears.”

“Okay,” Jaime said. “You know how I said a man could change his life like changing the channel on a TV?” The lieutenant nodded. “Well for that to happen you need a couple of different channels, right?”

“Um, okay,” the cop said.

“And to have different channels you need at least two different lives.”

“Hmm,” said the cop. “Are we talking about the same man here, one man, two different lives?”

“Si, one man, two different lives,” Jaime said.

“How’s that work then? Where’s the other life come from?”

“Put it this way,” Jaime said. “Say you make an important decision, like marrying your wife.”

“Go on.”

“Well the path you are on, the life you are living right now, that’s one path – call it path A.”

“Is this going to be like a math lesson?” the cop interrupted, “cause I hate math. I was never very good at it.”

“Quit interrupting, culo. Besides I happen to like math.”

“Figures,” the cop mumbled.

“Are you going to let me talk or aren’t you?”

“Go on,” said the cop, faking a yawn.

“Okay,” said Jaime. “The path you are on is path A. Path B would be the same path, the same life, the same you but one in which you did not marry your wife. Know what I mean?”

“Yes, yes,” said the cop motioning with his arm for Jaime to hurry. “Go on.”

“So now you have two different paths, two different lives. Marco married and Marco unmarried: path A and path B, right? So what happens if at some point these two different paths meet up again? What if unmarried Marco, our path B would suddenly wake up one day to find himself sleeping next to your wife, living the life of married Marco or path A?”

“Then I’ll kill the son of a bitch,” said the cop.

“I’m being serious here, Marco,” Jaime said.

“Sorry,” the cop said, “I’d say he’d gone loco. Crazy.”

“Yes, I suppose you would,” said Jaime, “but what if he had the actual memories of the other life as well, along with his own; that he could actually remember both lives. What would you say then?”

“What? You can do this?”

“Sure. For instance, I vividly remember this year going over to Jorge’s house, my older brother, for my nephew’s birthday. I remember it because Ricky was born on Valentine’s Day but this year the family wanted to celebrate it on the day before because he had a hot date the night of his birthday with his new girlfriend. For some reason, Ricky didn’t want to have his old tio around giving him any pointers.”

“So?” said the cop.

“I remember the cake was red velvet, his favorite; that most of the family was there; that I bought him an iTunes gift card because his mom won’t let him buy rap music, even though she’ll let him download it – don’t ask – I even remember the decorations in the window; the food we ate; the music we listened to; the whiskey I drank. I remember it all.

“And...” said the cop.

“And,” said Jaime, “the only problem is that my brother Jorge is dead; has been, at least in this life, since I was 16. The same with the rest of my family; two months ago in that life I was swapping stories with my brothers and sisters, yet twenty-five years ago in *this* life, they all died.”

“Okay,” said the cop. “That’s some pretty weird shit.”

“You think that’s weird, take a look at this,” Jaime said as he pulled back his gown and leaning forward to expose his shoulder blade.

“What,” said the cop, standing up to get a better look.

“See the scars?” said Jaime. “The ones in the back? The big pit?”

“Yea,” said Dellarosa.

“About fifteen years ago I was out with some friends, drinking a bit and goofing off, when one of them decided to pull over and rob a liquor store.”

The cop raised his eyebrows.

“What can I say,” Jaime said. “We were drinking and it sounded like a good idea at the time, know what I mean? Anyway, Alex, mi amigo, goes in the store and holds them up; only the idiot didn’t tell us. So we were outside standing around shooting the shit, you know, passing the bottle, when all of a sudden he comes running out yelling, ‘Get in the car! Get in the car!’ We were all like,

'What the...' when the guy behind the counter comes out with a shotgun. The first shot went wild and hit the roof over the gas pumps. But the second shot was right on target. Hit me right there," he said, pointing to the scar.

"Ouch," said Dellarosa.

"Ouch is right," continued Jaime. "The same shot hit Alex in the ass. He couldn't sit down for weeks after that, the stupid shit. It also took a chunk out of Jesus' head. Killed him dead right there in car, all three of us, one shot."

"Oooo."

"That was in the late 90s, 1998, 1999, somewhere around then. I remember it was in October because I had to pick a different costume for Halloween because the hole in my shoulder kept bleeding on the one I had - made my girlfriend, at the time, real mad as I recall."

"And..." asked the cop.

"That same time, same year, I also happened to be back east living with a group of Benedictine monks, teaching trigonometry to a bunch of kids from juvie. Now how could that happen?"

"Huh," said the cop. "Same time, you say?"

"Yep."

"And the scar, any explanation for it?"

"When I met you, Marco, Father Juan had only one scar on his body and that was from when he had his appendix removed when he, we, were 19. Then just yesterday the doctor told me he was able to save most of my guts, including my appendix which he seemed to think was pretty funny."

"Ha, ha," said the cop. "Look Father, sorry, Jaime, look, I have to say, this is sounding pretty darn weird to me right now."

"You're telling me," Jaime said. "That's some freaky shit there."

"So did you just like jump from one life to the next?"

"I guess. I don't really know. All I know is the division point seems to be when I became a priest. In one life I was Father Juan the priest, the other life Jaime Delgado a criminal. And I can tell you Marco, in my other life, Jaime was a serious criminal."

"So you're no longer a priest then?"

"Technically, I am an ex-communicant; a man cut off from the church. There's a fairly simple fix for that. Prayer, repentance and I'm back to being a priest. It

happens more often than you would think, even with priests. But there's a problem with that. I'm not the Jaime who made the initial vow of priesthood. That was another Jaime."

"So a man can jump tracks," said the cop, "but his spiritual – uh, what would you call them, promises – his spiritual vows don't?"

"Dunno. All I know is that gift of mine, the curse..."

"You mean the one that makes people confess to you?"

"And then die? Yep, that one. That part of me is gone. It died the night Father Juan killed Paul Doyle."

"You make it sound like it was someone else, instead of yourself," said the cop.

"In one sense it was someone else; in another sense it was me. Don't worry, morally, it doesn't matter. I knew there would be a cost to killing a man and I would have made that same choice regardless of which *me* was the one in the room. In this case, however, it means I'm no longer a priest."

"So you're sure it's gone?"

"Positive. I can tell. Want me to come by the jail and prove it?" Jaime said with a smile.

"No, no, no," said the cop. "I don't need any of *that* kind of trouble. I'll take your word for it."

"You know I've never lied to you, Marco," Jaime said softly.

"I know Jaime. I know. That's one of the reasons why I like you. Cops hear a lot of bullshit every day. It's nice to know someone who doesn't."

"Thanks, Marco. That means a lot to me."

The two men locked their hands together and held them.

"Listen, I gotta go," said the lieutenant. "You need anything, any food? The wife said she could bundle something up if you need it."

"Thanks Marco," said Jaime. "Tell your wife I said thank you but really I'm fine. Thanks for stopping by."

"You're welcome, Jaime. Does this mean you're no longer going to be having run-ins with the law?"

"Oh, I hope so," said Jaime. "I'll tell you one thing. I am not going to miss that part of Father Juan ever again. That's for sure."

Both men chuckled at this. Lieutenant Dellarosa got up and walked to the doorway before turning around. "Take care, Jaime."

"Thank you Marco, I will. Take care of your family will you?"

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

## Chapter 69

*(Later that day)*

"You know," said Father Jacob sitting in the chair next to Jaime's bed, "it's a bit unusual for the penitent to suggest their own renewal of obedience."

"Yes, Father," Jaime said.

The two men were sitting in Jaime's hospital room later that same day. Jaime was too sick to go to Mass, so the old priest had come by the hospital instead. Jaime half expected him to show up with his rusted metal box of tools and offer to rebuild his intestines with parts from an old airplane engine.

"Just like it's a bit unusual," the old priest continued, "to suggest laicization over this particular sin. I understand you might feel bad, son, but do you have to give up being a priest?"

"Well, Father," said Jaime. "Put it this way. I hear what you are saying but at the same time, I cannot help but feel that a man who can so casually kill another man should not be dispensing forgiveness or otherwise ministering to others. Does that make sense?"

"Technically, no, spiritually, maybe, but I understand your position and moreover appreciate the integrity of it."

"There's something else, Father. I have asked Rome to release me from my vow of chastity."

The old priest looked Jaime in the eye. "Now that," he said, "is something I can understand. I've seen more than one priest make that decision and I can't say it's a bad one, although I don't see why one would do it. Sounds like too much work to me."

“To stop being celibate?”

“No, no. To start being sexual,” the old priest said. “Being a priest may be no picnic but relationships? Marriage? Ugh. No thanks.

“By the way,” the priest continued, “does Emily know?”

Jaime’s face blushed. “Is it that obvious?”

“Either that or I’m *that* observant. Take your pick.”

“I’ll take observant. And in answer to your question: no, at least not yet.”

“That’s a pretty big decision,” the old priest said, “to make by yourself, don’t you think? I’m no expert but that’s not something you want to casually lay at the feet of a woman.”

“All good points, Father. But I didn’t want to stop being a priest so I could have sex with Emily. In fact, I really didn’t *want* to stop being a priest at all.”

“But...” said the priest.

“Exactly, but... I also didn’t want to be a priest at the cost of Emily’s life.”

“Do you think it came down to that?” the old priest said. “That your choice was to either be a priest or Emily would die? If so, I can tell you that is not a very theologically sound position.”

“It wasn’t God offering me the choice,” said Jaime, “or what I understand of God. It was Paul Doyle who put me in that position. That and my own foolishness for following Emily into a place I knew better than to go but I went anyway. Nope. No matter how you slice it, I was still the one who put myself in a position to have to make that choice. Moreover, if I was given the same choice again, right now, I would do the exact same thing.”

“You really think you made the right choice then?” asked the priest.

“No,” said Jaime. “I think I made the only choice for me.”

Father Jacob reached into his leather tote bag and pulled out a small piece of the host, a glass vial of wine and an old battered bible. “Okay,” he said. “I can live with that if you can.”

Jaime nodded his head. “Yes Father, I believe I can. I have to.”

“Good,” said the older priest. “Because I’m done with the obedience part and want to get on to the reconciliation. Personally, that’s my favorite part of this. Are you ready for the sacrament?”

“Yes, Father.”



“Excellent. Shall we pray...”

After Father Jacob had finished ministering the Sacrament of Reconciliation to Jaime, he started putting his things away. “By the way,” he said casually as he zipped up his bag, “did you hear about the wells?”

“No, Father. What about them?” Jaime asked.

“They’re working again. I mean the pumps are pumping water all over town. They started up Easter morning, all of them. It’s a miracle. Can you believe it?”

“Yes, Father,” said Jaime. “I believe I can.”

## Chapter 70

*(Wednesday, 5/18, Feast of Pope John I)*

“So how did the interview go?”

Emily and Jaime were lying together on her couch, side by side. It was not sexual, at least not yet. Neither of them were quite ready for that kind of relationship but it was not the chaste touch of a priest and parishioner either.

Jaime had had an interview that afternoon at Nazareth High School. The school was looking for a new math teacher. They were also looking for someone to coach the Swifts, the boys’ basketball team. He was hoping to get both positions.

“Good,” Jaime said. “In fact better than I hoped.”

“Really,” she asked. “How so?”

“Well Tamera, the District’s HR person was a bit concerned about my qualifications.”

“Did she bring that up often?”

“Only every chance she could get,” Jaime said. “I think she’s still stuck on me being a priest, or something.” The news of Jaime’s change from priest to lay

person did not go over well for some people, both in the church and out of it. "But everyone else at the school acted like the job was already mine."

"Hmm," said Emily. "That wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that half the school board goes to Holy Family would it?"

"Really?" said Jaime innocently. "I hadn't noticed."

"Or, that a certain Wendy Keim threatened bodily harm to those who didn't support you for the position."

"She did?" Jaime said. "I'm shocked. Shocked, I say."

"Oh foo," she said, slapping him playfully on the belly. That led to tickling which in turn led to kissing.

After a while Jaime asked, "Did Señora Keim really threaten bodily harm?"

"No silly," said Emily lightly tracing her fingers over the scars on his chest. "She just looked at them cross and threatened to sing to them. You know how she is."

"Yes I do," he said. A moment later he added, "Hey, I saw Mali on my way out of the interview. Did I tell you that?"

"You did?" she said. "What did he have to say?"

"You know that's the funny thing. He tossed me my basketball, the one we'd practiced with at his house."

"That's it?" she asked.

"Well, here's the funny thing. You know the line Gorgo gives to Leonidas before he goes off to Thermopylae? When she hands him his shield?"

"You mean, 'With this, or on this?'" she said.

"That's the one. Anyway he and I had been talking about Thermopylae, oh months and months back. So you know what he said when he tossed me the ball? He said, 'with this, or on this.'"

"Was he challenging you?"

"No. Not to another game. At least I don't think so. I think he was challenging me to get better, to get my skills in shape for next season."

"Sounds like he wants to play," she said.

"It does indeed." After a bit he continued, "You know his mom apologized to me last Sunday after Mass."

"She did," Emily asked. "I must have missed that. Wait a minute? Isn't she a

protestant?”

Jaime shrugged. “I guess. I don’t know. I only know I saw her at the parish after Mass. She was raised Catholic, though, you can tell, so I wouldn’t be surprised if she visited again.”

“Well, I hope so,” she said.

“So do I.”

The two sat together in silence, each enjoying the others company. After a while, Emily sat up and said, “I’ve been thinking...”

“That’s always a good start,” he said.

“Ha, ha,” she replied, and then stuck out her tongue at him. “There’s something about that night,” she continued, “you know, the one with Paul... well there’s something that doesn’t makes sense to me.”

“Shoot,” he said.

“If Father Juan was one life and Jaime Delgado was another then which one are you living now?”

“Hmm,” he said. “Good question. I don’t know. Both? Neither?”

“That’s not very clear,” she said.

“I don’t think there’s a clear answer,” he replied. “I have the memories of both lives and the scars to prove it. Maybe that means I can live the rest of my life with twice the wisdom of anyone else. After all, I’ve made twice the mistakes.”

“Funny,” she said, “and just possibly true. But that doesn’t answer the question. Whose life are you living now?”

“Mine,” he said. “My own. I’m neither a criminal nor a priest but something different. Something more, hopefully something better.”

“I am a former priest,” he added, “who loves women or at least one woman.”

“It better be only one woman,” she said threateningly.

“Okay, just one woman,” he said. “Will that do?”

She lay her head on his chest and snuggled up close. “Yep,” she said. “I think that’ll do. I can live with that.”

“Me too,” he said. “Me too.”