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121,100 words
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MICHAEL HANLON AND
THE SEVENTH PROTOCOL

Book one of the Saints and Demons trilogy

A NOVEL

By

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CHAPTER ONE

Mount Peyton, October, 1949

It was a dirty night, with the wind howling and the birch trees in our front yard lashing back and forth. Thick branches pounded against our veranda support poles, making the whole house shudder.

The weather wasn't the only thing that was messed up. Weird thoughts racing across my mind seemed to match up with our blustery fall weather, creating a rash of dark feelings that were new to me. Unpleasant stuff, I can tell you, but nothing I could grab hold of that would allow me to figure out what was going on. Just shadows and distorted images flitting back and forth.

It even made me a bit nervous.

Like, where did all this horrible stuff come from? These weren't the normal thoughts of an eleven-year-kid, that's for sure.

"Michael, don't you have a history test in the morning?" my mother called out from the kitchen, which brought me back in a hurry.

My latest effort to get the hang of Diana Shore's "Buttons and Bows" came to a grinding halt with a bunch of sour notes. I quickly apologized to our brand new Baldwin Acrosonic.

Spinning around on the piano bench, I wondered how she would have known about the test. I sure hadn't mention it, and my best friend Charlie Goodyear who had just pulled out, was one year ahead of me, so he had no idea what we were up to in grade six. It had to be that pint-sized rat out helping mom make molasses cookies. It wasn't the first time Liz had squealed on me. She was only in grade one, but the little twerp definitely enjoyed making my life difficult.

It was common knowledge that I *really* didn't like doing homework, but now with the cat was out of the bag I had no choice but to wander back to my bedroom and dig out my history book. Yuk!

I didn't exactly race back, but took the long way through the dining room where Dad had his right ear up against our giant radio listening to a hockey game. The Leafs were ahead in the standings, but Maurice Richard had just returned from an injury. I figured that was going to change things.

Dad was sporting a big grin as I shuffled past him. Reaching over for his snort of rum, he said, "Turk Broda's got his hands full tonight."

I nodded, "He's the best goalie they ever had. I bet he'll be able to hold off the Rocket."

"Let's hope so," Dad said as he lowered his head again. Like ninety percent of the residents in Mount Peyton, we were dyed-in-the-wool Toronto fans. The other ten percent had divided loyalties, with the exception of Montreal. Supporting the Canadians was considered a no-no and over at St. Paul's could get a guy in trouble. Even Father O'Reilly considered cheering for the Canadians a sin.

Buster was up on my bed, like he was most nights. I reached down to get my book bag, which woke him up. "Got a history test tomorrow, so I'd better read over a few pages."

I often spoke to Buster, and he usually responded with a few muted words in cat language. He got up on all fours, ready to leap down. "I'm not going to bed yet, so you can relax."

He figured that was okay, so he flopped back down, fiddled a bit with his big fluffy tail, then went back to sleep. I sat on the edge of the bed and unhooked the flap on my leather bag.

Boy, was I surprised. My history book wasn't in there.

That threw me for a loop, because I remember tossing it in right after Sister Bernice told us about the test. Ummm. Liz would usually be first on my list of suspects, but Liz never, under any circumstances, came into my bedroom.

So what happened to my history book?

Well, I guess that didn't matter now, because the bottom line was that I didn't have it. Fortunately, my house was right across the street from St. Paul's, so it was no more than a five-minute walk over to the furnace room door, and I knew exactly where Mr. Cater hid his key.

I plucked my little penlight from the top dresser drawer and made my way back through the kitchen. Liz looked up when she saw me and declared in that whiny voice of hers, "Mom, Michael's not doing his homework."

But Mom trusted me enough to know that sooner or later I would get on with my studies. Back in the front room I knelt on the sofa to peer out the window. It was after eight and even though the fog had settled in, I could still tell our school lights had been switched off. This told me no late night nuns were up wandering around and it was safe for me to sneak over to my classroom.

Just then Dad shouted, "Damnation!" which I took to mean Montreal just scored. I grabbed my windbreaker, opened the front door, and dashed across Church Road. On Wednesday there wouldn't be any traffic until later on when the men on the four to twelve shift at our local paper mill began making their way home. I noticed tiny snowflakes had joined in with the fog. Great. All we needed now was a flick of hail and some freezing rain, then the whole winter orchestra would be in attendance. Still, I guess this was kinda normal for our little central Newfoundland town in mid-October.

The furnace room door was at the rear of our school, just below the elevated glassed-in passageway on the second floor level where the nuns walked over from the convent next door. It was now dead dark, so I had to use the light to make my way down the concrete steps. Reaching up to the top of the big wooden doorframe to remove the key, I became aware of a tiny squiggle of uncertainty winding its way into my head. Like maybe breaking into school wasn't the smartest thing I'd ever done.

Inside, the room was warm from the huge furnace that fed hot water to our radiators. I closed the door behind me as the heavy odor of smoked salmon slammed into my nostrils. Everyone knew Mr. Cater, a bachelor, ate fish all year round. Then it occurred to me that my smaller footprints in the coal dust would be a sure giveaway if someone were to have reason to investigate a break-in.

I made my way up the steep staircase until I emerged from the caretaker's door and onto the main level. Just as I was about to dash down the hallway to the grade six classroom, my keen hearing zoned in on faint piano music coming from somewhere above me on the second floor.

Puzzled, and knowing all the lights were off, I wondered who on earth would be playing the piano in the dark. The melody sure didn't ring any bells, and yet I was pretty sure it wasn't a classical piece, the type of music usually played in school. This tune was catchy, like something Sinatra or Pattie Page would sing. I lost no time scurrying up our big double staircase but then paused at the top to listen. Standing there, I suddenly realized if I was caught inside at this late hour I would be paraded before Reverend Mother Josephine in the morning, meaning sore hands for the rest of the day.

So I should have turned around and gotten the heck out of there. Obviously. But I didn't. Why?

Because there was this little voice inside my head urging me on, telling me I ought to do it anyway.

Which was completely crazy.

Nevertheless, I forged ahead, even knowing I was sure to get caught.

I quietly eased open the door to the grade four classroom and squinted toward the corner where the piano was usually kept. Of course I knew that big old Heintzman was on wheels, so it could be anywhere. The tiniest flicker of light from a distant street lamp leaking through a corner window told me she was all alone, one of the nuns for sure. Who else could it be? The Sisters of the Presentation Order lived next door in the convent and usually walked over to school via their very own sky route. As my eyes adjusted, I was able to make out the dark form swaying from side to side as she played.

I simply could not stop myself from tiptoeing closer. Everyone in our family played piano, even Liz. Granted, at just ten days off my twelfth birthday and flat-out refusing to take lessons, my musical ability was pretty elementary. Still, I had a good memory for tunes and usually needed to hear a simple piece once or twice to get the hang of it. I was sure I'd never heard this one.

The music stopped with a clash of chords. "Who's there?" a terse voice demanded to know.

Darn! My first instinct was to hightail it out of there – I doubted if she, whoever she was, could catch up to me wearing the usual regalia nuns went around in.

“Don’t even think about it,” the menacing figure warned as she rose from the bench. In the near darkness she looked like a zombie rising from the grave. “And get yourself over here this instant!”

Conditioned to obeying any order given by any nun, I lowered my head and made my way over to the piano. The way she spoke, real slow-like, told me this was Sister Catherine, one of three new teachers who’d arrived just last month.

She switched on the little piano lamp and when she saw me let out a swoosh of air, as if someone had punched her in the stomach. “*You!*”

“Sorry Sister,” I mumbled. “I didn’t mean to – ”

“Silence! Now suppose you tell me, Michael Hanlon, exactly what you happen to be doing in school after hours?”

“History test tomorrow, Sister. Forgot my book, figured I’d better come back and get it.”

“And how, may I ask, did you manage to get in?”

Everyone knew the last thing Sister Ignatius did every evening was go round and make sure all the doors were locked, so I couldn’t tell Sister Catherine I’d found one open. Nope, I was stuck with telling the truth. “Uh, one day I saw where Mr. Cater hides his furnace room key,” I replied, quickly adding, “But I didn’t mean any harm, Sister.”

She was now about one foot away from me, and breathing kinda hard. “Is that the truth?”

“I swear it is, but when I came upstairs I heard someone playing some really nice music, so I thought”

“Agggghh! I don’t believe this. Of all the students in this school, it’s Michael Hanlon who pops out of the woodwork. You’re the one, right? The one who can listen to a tune, then sit down and play it?”

“Uh, I guess so, sometimes.”

Sister Catherine was tall and sort of skinny, towering over me by several inches. I didn’t know that much about her, but at the same time I hadn’t heard anything bad about her. She seemed young to me, but with no hair showing and her ears covered up, guessing her age was kinda tricky. I knew she taught grades one and two English, so it was unlikely I would ever have her as a teacher. She might have recognized me because Charlie’s back yard bordered on the

convent walking grounds, so any of the sisters who cared to look down could see us playing our guitars out on his back step. Every evening around seven we would see them out walking. Day in and day out, year in and year out, they walked that track four or five abreast with arms linked together, and they'd go twenty times each way, at a brisk pace too. Whenever I happened to be close enough to make out the expressions on their faces, it struck me that they were having fun, laughing and chattering away a mile a minute – not at all like the grumpy creatures who usually greeted us at the beginning of each school day.

“The question is, young man, do you think you can remember enough of what you just heard to go home and play it?”

Her tone was not unfriendly as she posed this question, prompting me to wonder what was going on. I began to relax a little. “Can't be sure, Sister. Wouldn't know until I tried it.”

“Well, my lad, we'll just have to find out. I want you to sit down right now and do your very best, understand, to duplicate what you just heard me play. Will you do this?”

Gosh! I was actually being *asked* to do something by a nun. “Don't know the key you were playing in, maybe D, but I can't read music so I usually play everything in C or G, maybe F sometimes.”

She smiled, a pretty nice one too, I noticed. “C will be fine. Now let's see how much you remember.”

I pulled the bench back in, placed the index finger of my right hand on the D note, played it once, C once, D again, E twice, then down to G. Never even got the left hand started when she leaned down and clamped her right hand over mine, stopping me dead.

“*Jumping Jesus!*” she whispered as she turned her head away. Needless to say, hearing a nun curse like that darn near knocked my socks off.

But what happened next was ... well, you'll see.

She let go my hand, let out another big sigh, then straightened up and moved behind me. Her hands took hold of my shoulders, but gently, barely touching my windbreaker. I didn't dare move.

“Do you consider yourself an intelligent person, Mister Hanlon?”

Intelligent – me? Uh-uh. I did what I had to do in school and that was about it. More than one teacher over the years had called me lazy, lazy in schoolwork, that is. Problem was, my dad was a part-time trapper, and I guess during those endless hours while we were being told about

the great things that went on over there in Europe during the Industrial Revolution, my mind tended to wander back into the bush, where I might wonder if I'd set a certain beaver trap too low in the water, or if my latest run of rabbit slips had produced any results, or if that huge moose I'd seen again last week over at Tucker's Marsh was still around. Sure love to get that one, even if I'd been warned not to go killing any big old bulls because their meat was like chewing on one of Dad's moccasins.

"Don't know for sure, Sister. Kinda average, I'd say."

"What is your favorite book?"

I had to think about that. "I really enjoy reading about the Hardy Boys, and Zane Grey's *Spirit of the Border* was great, but ..." Not sure why I hesitated to go on, but I suppose she could tell I was getting a bit uncomfortable.

She came round and sat beside me, those giant rosary beads attached to her black leather belt banging against my bare right knee. "Michael, I don't expect you to understand what this is all about, but hearing me play that particular piece of music tonight has raised certain issues that you and I both have to address, and I am trying to get a sense of who and what you are. So tell me about your reading."

"It's Ayn Rand, Sister. Her book –"

"Not *Atlas* – no, no – Ummm, it has to be *The Fountainhead*."

"That's the one. I read it twice now, and that story is pretty powerful, kinda stayed with me."

"My goodness, you seem awfully young to be reading Ayn Rand. Did you know that woman is Russian?"

It was the fall of nineteen forty-nine and Canada (we were no longer Britain's oldest colony because five months ago a politician named Joey Smallwood waved his magic wand and changed us into Canadians) was just beginning to find out that the communists were not so friendly anymore. According to the radio, there was something bad happening over in Korea and it involved communists.

"Yes, but Mr. Hartley told me she lives in America now." Mr. Hartley was the town librarian. "Have you read it, Sister?"

Sister Catherine raised both hands to her cheeks. "Michael Hanlon, I can only hope you won't be the death of me. I want you to remain here. You are not to move until I return."

At least things were back to normal; I'd just been given a direct order. No problem. I stayed put.

Clump, clump, clump. Sister Catherine was back. She held a thick book in her left hand and sat beside me again. The piano lamp's yellow glow told me she was deep in thought; it also revealed the book's cover, which made me wonder. After a few minutes silence, she said,

"Michael, I have a favor to ask of you. A very big favor."

It wasn't a question, so I didn't say anything.

"Does anyone know you came back to school this evening?"

"No, Sister."

"Have you done this before?"

"No, Sister."

"Are you a good Catholic, Michael?"

"Try to be, Sister."

"Do you go to confession every week?"

"When I can, Sister."

"Very well, Michael. You and I are about to enter into a pact. Do you know what a pact is?"

"Kinda, Sister."

"The bottom line will be when you leave here this evening, it will be like nothing ever happened. You did not come back to school for your history book, and you never heard me play the piano. But, most important of all, you will purge from your mind any music you heard here tonight. It will be as if this interlude in both our lives never happened. Are you going to be okay with this?"

"Like a secret, something that just you and me –"

"You and I."

"– you and I will know about. This what you mean?"

"Oh dear!" Another big sigh. "Yes, Michael, and I am truly sorry that I have to ask a fine young man like you to carry such a burden; but believe me, I have no choice."

I had no idea where Sister Catherine was coming from or what burden she was getting at; but then again my current teacher, Sister Bernice, often said things I didn't understand. So at the time it was no big deal to me that I didn't have a clue what this strange nun was going on about.

“Now take the Bible in your right hand and repeat everything I tell you.”

Growing just a tad nervous now and finally sensing there was more going on here than my little pea brain could grab hold of, I took the book as directed and stared down at it.

“I hereby swear upon this Holy Bible never to tell a single soul that I came back to school this evening.”

I hesitated just a little before repeating her words.

“Or that I heard Sister Catherine play the piano.” I spoke the words after she finished.

“And I will never, ever attempt to play anything I heard played here this evening on any instrument, to sing or hum the melody, to write down the notes or to duplicate it by any means whatsoever.”

When I took a few seconds to think this one over, she prompted me by squeezing my right arm. I said what she just told me. “Now, Michael, this is very serious. Repeat after me: ‘I hereby call upon Almighty God to bear witness that I will never betray this confidence’. Go ahead, say that.”

I did, reluctantly, and then she dropped the bomb: “And if I were ever to do so, may my immortal soul burn in hell for all eternity.”

I *really* didn’t like this part, and started to say so. “But Sister – ”

She seemed nervous herself when she placed the tips of her fingers on my lips. In a low, intense tone of voice, she said, “Michael, please believe me, I would not presume to ask for such a terrible commitment unless I felt it were absolutely necessary. Now say it!”

Yipes! Telling God it was okay to send me to hell seemed like a real bad idea, and my hackles were beginning to stand up. “Sister, you shouldn’t be asking me to say things like that. It’s not right.”

“Goddamn it, Michael Hanlon, *say it!*”

So I did, and afterwards she took me into her arms and began to sob. I had no idea what to do next. Other than Mom, the only woman to hold me that way was Aunt Marg, and she hugged everyone.

A few minutes went by before Sister Catherine settled down. You must realize being held by any nun dressed up in wimples and other things made out of heavy starched material isn’t all that comfortable, so I was kinda glad when she finally released me.

“You can go home now Michael, and make sure no one sees you leave the building. Sorry for all the theatrics, and I truly hope this is the end of the story.”

When I got up to leave, Sister Catherine switched off the piano lamp but remained seated on the bench. As I neared the door leading into the darkened hallway, she called out, “Don’t forget your history book.”

“No, Sister,” I replied, happy to be free from what was definitely the weirdest encounter of my young life. But just as I was pushing the door closed, I heard her whisper, *“I’m truly sorry about this. It won’t happen again.”*

CHAPTER TWO

Manhattan, 2011

As she often did, the moment she finished her last song, Susan dashed back to her little sanctuary at the rear of the club, well away from its noisy patrons and the growing number of guys trying to hit on her. After a quick visit to the powder room, she glanced into the mirror and studied her new pixie hairstyle, in some ways regretting the loss of the strawberry blond ponytail she had carried around forever. Tilting her chin and smiling into the mirror, she could plainly see this cut made her appear younger and if anything, even saucier. After opening the window a crack, she took off her shoes, fluffed out her new China blue evening gown, put up her feet and attempted to make use of her break to catch up on her studies.

During the day, twenty-two-year-old Susan Bartlett attended Columbia University where she was in her second year of medical studies and doing better than she expected. Her ultimate goal was nuclear medicine, but that was years away. At night, Monday to Friday, she played the piano and sang soft jazz from ten to two a.m. at one of three upscale nightclubs owned by local real estate billionaire Harry Malinger. Harry liked Susan's old style, laid-back music and paid well for her services, so it was a good arrangement.

She had just opened her notebook when she heard rapid footsteps outside her window, like someone running flat-out. Later, thinking back, she had no idea what possessed her to switch off her lamp and cross the room to the single window overlooking the alleyway. Susan was very aware of the kind of activities that went on in this part of the city, things she shouldn't see, and yet she was curious. She moved the metal blind aside just enough to allow her to peer down into the dimly lit lane. Her eyes adjusted to the gloominess just in time to see a small man come to a sliding halt not thirty feet away. Light emanating from the lower floor windows allowed her to catch the look of wild desperation as he turned to glance back over his shoulder. Then the runner let out a loud groan, dropped to his knees and raised his hands high above his head.

Susan was suddenly overcome by a powerful urge to flee the room, to escape before she witnessed something terrible. She allowed the blind to float back into place. But before she could turn away, she became aware of a bright light washing across the window. She stood there, feeling anxious, then slowly edged the blind aside a second time.

The light was so powerful she had to shield her eyes in order to see what was going on, but then she realized the light was radiating from the runner's hands. Susan had barely time to take this in before she spotted two more figures standing one on either side of the runner. It was as if they had just stepped out of the darkness. From her vantage point on the second floor, they seemed enormous, a pair of giants, maybe eight feet tall, dressed in what appeared to be long black cloaks with big bumps high up on their backs.

Every particle in Susan's body screamed at her to get moving, and yet ... she seemed frozen in time, incapable of any movement.

"Jommall bleesh awalg!" one of the giants bellowed. Then the runner opened his arms and appeared to direct intense beams of light at the two giants. A powerful force caught the giants and threw them ten paces in either direction, but they quickly popped upright and pointed their hands toward the runner.

Susan was never certain what happened next. She could only guess at the sequence of events, although those three menacing words accurately imbedded themselves in her memory.

Then the giant on the right began to laugh and muttered something Susan could not make out. The giant on the left responded with a single grunting noise, and when he did, the runner's light was instantly extinguished. Near as Susan could tell, thick bands of darkness began to

radiate out from each giant, until the runner vanished from sight. Seconds later, the runner's body reappeared, floating in front of her for a brief moment of time.

Then it exploded!

Pieces of clothing and miniscule body parts slapped against the brick walls on both sides of the alleyway. Her window now covered in blood, Susan yelled, "*Jumping Jesus!*" snatched up her leather carry bag and fled the room.

Back in the alleyway, the senior of the two giants, Maloch, let out a load roar as he moved close to his assistant and unleashed a vicious backhand that drove him to the ground. The downed giant began to whimper like a child.

Maloch looked up at the window Susan had just deserted and shook his head in disgust. "Problem!"

He was no longer speaking to his warrior underling, but to the Entity himself, the one who depicted the order of all such actions taken by the Lower Kingdom.

"A woman, a young one, heard the words," proclaimed a deep voice from out of the darkness. "*Kill her!*"

Susan was in full flight as she made her way around the tables, down the stairs, through the dazzling entry hallway and out the front door with her left hand clutching the billowing gown to keep from tripping.

"What the hell!" Benny Kirsh exclaimed as a flash of blue zoomed by. He watched Susan take a left turn onto Tenth Avenue, the peculiar image of her bare feet taking a few seconds to register. But Benny didn't have a whole lot of time to consider what Susan Bartlett might be up to because just then a ferocious rumbling noise from behind him prompted the bouncer to rush back inside the club and up the stairway to the main floor.

He was astonished to see all the lights had gone out. Or had they? He could still make out some, but these were more like flickering candles, they were so faint. Benny wondered why everyone was screaming their heads off, but when he noticed the people beside him looking up, he did the same, and saw that the great rumbling noise was the mirrored ceiling breaking free.

Earthquake!

Bodies flew past him and down the stairs. Benny decided to do the same, but a dozen guests were already there, frantically pulling at the big double doors.

Benny elbowed his way through, puzzled by the sight of the steel crossbar set in place. Wondering who might have done this in the few seconds he'd been away, Benny gripped the crossbar with his powerful hands and pulled, but the doors held fast. More screams made him turn around, and as he did, a thick cloud of darkness flew down the stairway and washed over the panicking crowd.

Their piercing cries didn't last long, maybe ten seconds, until the stairway behind the terrified patrons turned into a ferocious fireball. The temperature was so extreme that eighteen minutes later the entire building had burned to the ground.

No one escaped. All were consumed.

*

Outside, Maloch, leader of the two giants, nodded in satisfaction. The woman was certain to be among the three hundred or so charred bodies. "No harm done," he said to his subordinate. "Next time, keep your big mouth shut."

The second giant, Battall, lowered his head in shame. The penalty for serious offenses among the earth demons was nearly always banishment to the Lower Abyss. Battall had foolishly shouted the secret incantation without thinking and knew very well Maloch's swift reaction was all that saved the day for him.

"Truly, I am in your debt, noble Maloch."

Maloch grunted his acknowledgement. He could not help but consider that just one year ago he would never have been permitted to conduct such random decimation. But times were swiftly changing, even in America, the last real bastion of resistance. As for those humans who had been given power to cope with forces of the Antichrist, they were no match for warriors brought straight from the depths of hell, as the last runner had just learned. Maloch knew there were many more like that one, though their meager powers were intended to deal with human intent, not a demon's great might.

Already they had taken control of seven countries. The Underworld owned them body and soul. Soon enough Prince Lucifer would control everyone and everything, and when that time came, the many who had served with distinction over the centuries would move their place of habitation onto the earth, where they would rule without hindrance forever more. Such was the decree of the Great Lord of the Underworld.

“*Idiots!*” screamed the Entity into Maloch’s right ear, startling him. “Even now a woman flees up the street. It has to be the one. If she reaches sanctuary, it could mean disaster.”

“Which way, Master?”

“North!”

Without further comment, Maloch unfurled his enormous wings and rose quickly above the growing crowd of spectators. Battall appeared beside him and together they made their way north along Tenth Avenue.

Even though it had not been revealed to Maloch the actual meaning of those special words they had been ordered to use prior to final termination, each of hell’s legionnaires currently on duty had been instructed to *whisper* the Words, because no human ears must ever hear what was being said. Maloch wondered about this. If the outcome was successful and the victims died without speaking to anyone, why should it matter? But Maloch never questioned his orders. His function was to serve, and someday soon, if everything went as planned, he would reap the rewards.

*

Three blocks north of Bandero’s Hot Spot nightclub, up on the second floor of Sacred Heart rectory on West Fifty-First, Father Dumont was having a difficult time getting to sleep. The illuminated hands of his wall clock told him the time was 1:27 a.m. Unsettling visions had been flitting around his head ever since dinner; he seemed not to have any control over them. He had just completed three rosaries, all to no avail. So, in a way, the fact that his intercom suddenly began buzzing at this late hour did not come as a complete surprise. Somehow, in that mysterious fashion the mind has in knowing such things beforehand, he was expecting to be disturbed. Still, a quick glance over his shoulder at the image on his security screen was not what he expected to see.

The elderly pastor scrambled to throw on a robe and tie it together as he rushed downstairs to open the door. A terrified Susan Bartlett squeezed past him as soon as the space allowed her to do so.

“Shut it – *now!*”

The priest did as he was told, but had no sooner set the first bolt in place when the door was struck by a powerful force, almost caving it in. “What in God’s name – ”

“The church, Father! Something terrible has happened – hurry!”

The priest didn't have to be told that some dreadful creature was outside his door wanting in. For sure, that great thump had not been made by your average thief looking for last Sunday's collection.

He grabbed Susan's hand and took off at a half run down the oak-paneled hallway toward the back of the building that connected with the church's rear entrance.

*

Outside, Maloch was working his way through a string of ancient curses. Thinking out loud as he floated back down to earth, he said, "This is not a church. The church is further along the road. This is a priest's rectory. Is a rectory sanctuary? Does the Accursed One live there as well?" He knew some rectories had chapels, and if he were to force his way in and come face to face with the body of Christ – he would suffer the immediate loss of his powers, even the possibility of eternal banishment.

Maloch knew this to be true, because over the centuries many of his former comrades had been forced to render up their tenure upon earth due to such accidental encounters.

The senior demon was disgusted with himself. He hated failure. All very well to throw the blame on that idiot Battall but that accomplished nothing. Any other Christian church they could invade with impunity, but not a Catholic church, because of who resided there. Grinding his overgrown teeth together, he had little choice but to once again summon the Entity.

"O Great One – she has fled into a Catholic rectory, presumably because she knows the priest. Is this building considered a sanctuary? Is it safe to go in after her?"

No immediate reply was forthcoming, because like Maloch, the Entity too was forbidden access to any place where the Accursed One resided. Under such tenuous circumstances, even the immortal Prince of Darkness had no way of knowing what might be safe venue for a demon.

Maloch satiated his anger by reaching across the street to grab hold of a doddering old woman and fling her against a building. "*Jommall bleesh awalg!*" he whispered as her old crone head popped like a melon and her splattered blood all but obliterated a nearby sign advertising Specials on Perms.

He grinned his crooked demon grin. Too late now to fix up her hair.

This caused Maloch to wonder why the Entity had made no mention of the three hundred humans who had just died in the fire. He took this as yet another sign that the power of the Underworld was increasing all the time, just as Prince Lucifer predicted it would.

Maloch was aware of Battall hovering some distance off. He looked frightened, and Maloch knew he had every reason to be.

Battall was desperately hoping the Entity would come up with something useful, but when it became clear that no reply was forthcoming, he asked Maloch, “What are we supposed to do now?”

“We wait.”

*

It wasn't entirely by accident that Susan Bartlett sought refuge within the familiar confines of Sacred Heart Church. Because she had reason to believe her pursuers were not of this world, in her panicky dash for survival she considered it more expedient to seek hallowed sanctuary. Fortunately, Sacred Heart was close by. This was where she played the organ at the ten a.m. Sunday Mass, a welcome respite from her noisy nightclub venue.

Seated upon the lower of the two big marble steps leading up to the altar, Susan was just completing her terse rundown of the events that had prompted her to invade Father Dumont's rectory at this time of night. She was still shaking as the kindly priest continued to wrap bandages around her torn and bleeding feet.

“You know, my child, I've been working at this business for nigh on sixty years, and I've watched the Church slowly but surely lose its authority over the Lower Kingdom, so in one sense such brazen acts don't surprise me at all. You may have heard the Holy Father's warning last May that we have now entered the age of the Antichrist. Many thought this nothing more than a clever ploy, something to distract the media from the pedophile priest scandal hanging over his head. I don't agree. I'm not even sure why Holy Mother Church chose this particular moment in time to make such an announcement, because age-old thinking on the Antichrist tells us he's been around for a long, long time.”

Father Dumont's gravelly voice hardened. “You know what tomorrow is, don't you?”

Susan nodded. Everyone knew. It was the ten-year anniversary of nine-eleven.

“Well then, look at the way these Muslim extremists go about their business of slaughtering anyone and everyone, whenever and wherever they can. Are such murderers demons in disguise? Not real demons perhaps, but there's little doubt that a good percentage of their ranks have been infiltrated with those who are controlled by Lucifer himself.”

Susan had trouble wrapping her mind around such a contentious proposition, but was prepared to admit Father Dumont's range of knowledge on such issues far exceeded hers. Whatever about Islam, she now had her own future to worry about.

The painful throbbing in her feet just now setting in, she wondered about her abrupt decision to flee to Sacred Heart Church. Why hadn't she simply run back inside the club and started screaming her head off? Or gone to the local police precinct three blocks in the other direction? It was almost as if she had instinctively known worldly powers could not protect her.

"Say that *is* them outside – the same ones that caused that poor man in the alley to disintegrate before my eyes. Why on earth would those horrible creatures follow me here? I can't possibly know anything that would pose a danger to them."

The old priest slowly assumed the erect position, rubbing his lower back as he did so. "You just witnessed a brutal murder, but from what you tell me the murderers were not of this world and presumably could care less who sees them. So I tend to agree with you."

He paused and glanced up at the imposing crucifix behind the altar. "On the other hand, I suppose it is possible you may have seen or heard something that in some mysterious manner *could* pose a threat to the outrageous freedom they've recently come to enjoy. Though I can't begin to guess what that might be."

"I suppose the police are going to want to talk to me," Susan murmured.

"Don't worry about the police. My cell phone is up in my room. Do you have yours?"

Susan reached into her carry bag and handed over her Blackberry. Father Dumont studied the instrument to make sure he knew how to use it. "I'm going to step behind the altar and give Bishop O'Grady a call. You will be quite safe here."

Susan nodded. By now her backup guitar, bass and drums would be wondering what happened to her, but sooner or later they would learn the truth from Benny the bouncer – that she'd fled the building. Of course no one would know the reason. Not until daylight at any rate. Staring down at her bandaged feet, Susan Bartlett was overcome with a strong sensation of having just lost something of great value. But ... she was lucky to be alive at all, with the hounds of hell braying at her heels.

Then she remembered where she was, at the foot of the altar. She loved this old church, dating back to eighteen seventy-six, with its striking golden marble columns running up both sides and the lovely white balconies that loaned a feeling of the Deep South.

Turning about, she addressed the tabernacle where the Sacred Host resided. “I’m not sure what I got myself into here, but I’m really going to need Your help”

She tried to recall the worst sin she’d ever committed and get it out into the open, just in case someone up there in heaven was holding it against her and this was the reason she was being punished.

For that, Susan had to return to the little farm in Indiana where she was raised. “I’m truly sorry about that time I put the lye in Uncle Henry’s pants. I know it was a bad thing to do, but it sure did stop him from messing around with other little girls.”

Father Dumont returned in time to catch her last words but didn’t comment. He lowered himself to one knee and took Susan’s hand. “Bad news, my child. It’s Banderó’s. The place just burned to the ground, and at this point they’re saying no one’s got out alive. It seems you are a very fortunate young woman.”

Stunned, Susan could only stare back in silence.

The priest glanced up at the altar, once again wondering why so little help seemed to be coming their way. It was as if God had lost all interest in humanity and didn’t care what happened. “Truly, I fear if they can do this with impunity, they can get away with anything. In any case, Bishop O’Grady is going to make a few calls and get back to me, so I’d better hang onto your cell phone for now.”

Susan shrugged, and was about to ask a question when her Blackberry buzzed. The priest looked at the number and concluded the call was for him. He answered, and then Susan watched his face become grim. “I fully understand, Excellency. No, I’ll make sure she is safe, and please tell Dr. Romanos to knock seven times on the front door. Loud.”

After he closed off the Blackberry, Father Dumont said, “A professor from Harvard University will be showing up three to four hours from now, so I would suggest you use the time to close your eyes and get some sleep. Come along with me, I’ll grab some blankets and a pillow and we’ll set you up in a little cot we have back there in the sacristy.”

Taking in her lovely full length China blue gown, he added, “No pajamas though – sorry. It’ll be hard I know, but try to settle your mind. Say some prayers. You are in God’s house and in His hands. He will not let you down.”

CHAPTER THREE

Mount Peyton, 1949

I didn't see Sister Catherine again until the following Friday when I was removing my windbreaker from the coat rack near the front entrance. She had just stepped out of the chemistry lab, the place where all the bad smells came from.

"Michael!" she declared, a note of surprise in her voice. It was almost as if she had never expected to run into me again. "How are you?"

Ummm. I'd been giving a lot of thought to last Tuesday's strange encounter, which was still going round and round in my head. I'd figured out the reason she wanted me to be quiet about the tune I'd heard her play, was because she wrote it and didn't want anyone to know about it until it was published, or copyrighted, or whatever it is they do with songs.

Which made me mad. I had more or less signed over my soul to hell just so she could get a song published. The tune wasn't that great anyway. Not in the same class as Hoagy Carmichael or Cole Porter.

So I was still feeling kinda grumpy when I lowered my head and replied, "Okay, I guess."

Before I knew it, she seized my right arm, pulled me back inside the chemistry lab and closed the door. But this time I wasn't going to be any pushover.

“You let me go, right now!”

She did, clearly taken back at my belligerent tone. “I was wondering about your history book. You found it, did you?”

One of the awful things they brewed up in here was still kicking up such a stink that I almost had to hold my nose, but her question opened up a whole new line of thinking. You see, that day when I left class I remember turning down a page I wanted to look at, then sliding the book into my book bag. Later that night, when I went to pull it out, the book wasn't there. So I had no choice but to go back to school and get the darn thing. Hole in my memory, I figured at the time. Now, suddenly, I wasn't so sure.

Sister Catherine, seeing my troubled expression, asked, “You did find it, didn't you?”

I looked up, into those big blueberry eyes anxiously studying me and was surprised to see a few strands of reddish colored hair curling up and around her right cheekbone. This was new to me, as I'd never seen a nun's hair before. At least I knew now they had hair. The other thing I noticed were her eyelashes. I'd never seen eyelashes that long. It's a wonder Reverend Mother hadn't made her trim them back.

“Sure, I found it okay, but I ... well, far as I was concerned ...” I had to stop and search around for the right words. “Sister, I'm pretty sure I put that book in my bag in the first place. Darned funny thing, when I got home it wasn't in there. Don't you find that kinda weird?”

Sister Catherine nodded, slowly, then backed up to the nearest stool and sat down. I could almost hear her mind spinning around.

After a moment or two of pondering my question, she said, “The very evening I finally summon up enough courage to sneak back into school to play the piano, happens to be the same evening you return to get your history book. Not one of the other two hundred and forty-eight little animals I see running up and down this corridor every day, but Michael bloody Hanlon, who not only plays the piano but can remember any damned tune! Now that, I do find weird.”

Boy, talk about bad language. I was beginning to wonder why Sister Catherine decided to become a nun in the first place. Sure didn't sound like one, or behave like one. Still, even at my young age I couldn't help but notice she looked kinda pretty. I figured with ears and hair and those other female things sticking out where they could be seen, most older guys would find her attractive.

“Sister, you don't sound like someone who comes from around here.”

“Oh, who do you think I sound like?”

“Well, Sister, just last week I went to see *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, and I figure you talk more like John Wayne than people in this part of the world, real slow-like.”

“Yes, Michael, I come from Saskatchewan, which is way out west on the prairies. You *do* know about the prairies?”

“Sure I do.”

“Well then, this is how folks from out there speak.” Then, to my surprise, a big grin worked its way across her face and she said, “Smells like shit in here, doesn’t it?”

I felt myself warming up to this unusual nun, so I grinned back at her. “That’s for sure, Sister.”

I hadn’t mentioned this before, because there’s been no need to do so, but lately a few girls in grade seven have been giving me a hard time, messing with my clothes and pulling my hair. Betty Mason’s been telling me how cute I am, and just last Saturday over at Nigel Blackmore’s birthday party, Patsy Murphy whispered in my ear that she wanted to give me kissing lessons before darting away, laughing her head off. And these last few months my Aunt Marg, every time she pops in, says, “Come over here, you cute little rascal and give Auntie Marg a hug.”

I know I shouldn’t let this girl stuff go to my head, but I was beginning to think they kinda liked me. There was a certain charm in our family, my mother always said, the Hanlon charm, which she said caused her to dump her first boyfriend and marry Dad.

I decided the time had come to see if there was any truth to that. “Sister, I really liked that tune you were playing. When are you going to get it published?”

“Jumping Jesus, Hanlon! Didn’t I tell you not to go blabbing that about! How am I going make you understand that subject is off limits.”

Then the door was flung open and in marched Reverend Mother Josephine. This person, I can tell you, was one mean nun. She was big, darn near six feet, with a long horsey face that never, and I mean *never*, smiled. While hardly any of the nuns had any real color, Reverend Mother Josephine’s face was dead white, as if she had already visited the grave. She also carried around a three-foot birch rod she took pleasure in using on anyone caught not towing the line. Her predecessor, Reverend Mother Agnes, had been a kind and gentle woman, loved by everyone

who knew her. She died over the summer. Old age, they said. A double tragedy, when you consider who we got stuck with.

“And what have we here? Sister Catherine, please explain yourself at once.”

Sister Catherine popped off the stool. “This is young Michael Hanlon, Reverend Mother. He lives in that big white house just across from the school.”

“I know perfectly well who he is. The question is – what are you two discussing in here all by yourselves, and I want the truth.”

“Cancer, Reverend Mother.”

Reverend Mother Josephine looked over at me. “Michael, do you have cancer?”

“Not me, Reverend Mother,” I replied, figuring if it was okay for a nun to lie, I could too. “It’s Grandmother Kerry. We just got word last night.”

“Oh my. How terrible for her. But why aren’t you discussing this with your own teacher, Sister Bernice?”

“Well, I heard Father O’Reilly, just after Sister Catherine showed up last month, tell someone her mother died of cancer, so I thought Sister Catherine wouldn’t mind ...”

“Enough! Is that true, Sister?”

Sister Catherine hung her head. I could hear her sniffles building up. She took a few seconds before she could get a word out, and finally said in a tearful voice, “It was after she died that I made my final decision to enter the convent.”

“You poor dear. I am so sorry. I hope I haven’t upset you.” With that, Reverend Mother backed up to the door, opened it, and added softly, “Carry on then, by all means.”

We waited until we were sure the old bat wasn’t going to pop back in, then started grinning at each other like crazy. When I finally burst out laughing, Sister Catherine said, “Shhhhh. Michael Hanlon, I swear to God you are one smooth liar.”

“Didn’t do so bad yourself, Sister. I just hope Reverend Mother don’t go and check up with Father O’Reilly.”

“Sister Clare told me those two hate each other. Have you ever seen them speak?”

“Never,” I confirmed.

Then, staring me in the eye, she nodded to herself and edged forward until we were almost touching. Opening her arms, she said. “Give me a hug, you little scalawag.”

I was happy to do so, but then, once Sister drew back, I saw that her tears were real tears. This really bothered me. I just couldn't figure out why every time she ran into me, sooner or later she started to cry.

“Sister?”

“Oh Michael, if only you knew. If only I had someone I could talk to.”

“But Sister, you already know you can talk to me.”

We were standing so close I could smell the soap she washed with, which was kinda nice. She withdrew, reluctantly it seemed to me, and sat back on the stool. She wiped away her tears and glanced over at the Blessed Virgin's picture at the back of the room.

Nodding away to herself, she said, “He said someone might show up, but I never expected it to be a child.”

That hurt. I was hardly a child.

“I don't know, Michael. Maybe our meeting wasn't a big coincidence after all. Maybe you *are* one of the good guys. Maybe you're not. *Shit!* I'm hanging myself out here. I'm making the decision right now, at this very moment, that could see me into an early grave.”

Then she gave me a look that I will never forget: real grim, almost like a dead person would wear. In the saddest voice I could ever imagine, she said, “It's shadows, Michael. It's all about shadows.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Manhattan, 2011

The professor from Harvard University arrived just past five. Father Dumont had never met this man his bishop referred to simply as the Greek, but over the last several months his name had popped up more than once: Dr. Victor Romanos. He had been told to come to the church's front entrance because the priest had good reason to suspect his rectory was under surveillance.

Father Dumont hurried down the center aisle to undo the two heavy bolts. Swinging one of the huge doors aside, a stocky fellow in his late-seventies nodded and stepped over the threshold. He removed his old-style wide-brimmed fedora with his left hand and dipped the fingers of his right hand in the holy water fount. The use of his thumb and two fingertips to make the sign of the cross confirmed his Orthodox affiliation.

After a brief introduction, the visitor's weatherworn features twisted into a scowl. "Sad times, Father, demons monitoring your church. Something in here they are desperate to get at or anxious to destroy."

Father Dumont took the gray trench coat his visitor was in the act of shedding, then added the hat on top as the two men began making their way up the center aisle. "I guess that doesn't

surprise me. The second I closed the door behind Susan, some powerful force crashed into it. Still, I must say it's hard for me to envision demons lying around in plain view of everyone. You can actually see them?"

"Not at all."

"Well, then ...?"

"Shadows. That is how you can tell there's a demon about. And the odor, of course. Sulfurous, very sharp. No, it is not given to the likes of me to actually see evil – thank God. Not only that, if a normal person were to catch sight of a demon in his true form, he would probably lose his vision. But every demon casts a shadow the moment he touches down to earth. Whenever you see a shadow, especially a moving shadow, and can't identify what is making it – Bang! There's your demon."

"Surely they must be able to see you?"

"Of course they can, and they know what I represent."

"Which is?"

"Trouble. You see, I'm not their worst nightmare." He cracked a faint smile. "But close to it."

"Aren't you in danger from them?"

"Not at all."

Sacred Heart's elderly pastor wondered about this. "You do know the girl saw them?"

Victor paused and turned to face the priest. "Do you believe her?"

"I've known Susan Bartlett ever since she arrived from ... Indiana, I believe, three, four years ago. Smart young woman, musically talented. Taking medicine at Columbia. What possible reason would she have to lie?"

"None, I suppose. But it is unheard of for a normal person to catch sight of demons at play. It's a wonder she's still alive."

"The way she tells it, there were intense light beams coming from the hands of the poor chap they assassinated, so would that not allow her to see them?"

Victor stopped again. "Ah! Which means he was one of ours, someone with a similar vocation to mine, except his was much more dangerous. Well then, that brave soul has gone on to his reward. Still, I find this all very interesting An oversight by the Underworld, allowing themselves to be seen like that? Perhaps. Where is she now?"

“In the sacristy, trying to get some sleep. The poor child is terribly upset. Have you heard about the nightclub where she worked?”

“Burned to the ground. No survivors. If that fire was not accidental or the result of some terrorist goons carrying out Satan’s dirty work, and these two demonic intruders outside your door really were responsible, then I’ve not heard of anything more blatant. It makes me wonder if we haven’t just crossed over into new territory.”

Arriving at the foot of the altar, both men genuflected. Victor said, “You had better go wake her. I’ll wait here.”

When Father Dumont vanished behind the altar, the Greek mediary stepped into the nearest pew and dropped to his knees. He let out a big sigh. Dr. Victor Romanos, MA, PhD, LHD, ThD, was in his twenty-eighth year of residency at Harvard Divinity School. Due to the onerous burden placed upon him by his other job, he had consistently refused to take on the directorship, as well as being forced to adopt the ascetic lifestyle of priesthood. No marriage for him. No children. No person close enough for the Underworld to use against him. Such had been his introduction as a young man, and such was the manner of the life he had been forced to live.

As for his many scholastic accolades, he often thought the one most suited to describe his lifetime achievements was surely *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* – AMDG. For the greater glory of God.

Victor had no difficulty recalling his introduction into this tiny cabal of righteous individuals known as mediaries. He remembered, as if it were yesterday, being told about Pius X’s nineteen ten apparition by Gregory the Great, wherein the renowned Sixth Century pope had declared that the time had come to prepare for the rising supremacy of the Antichrist. Mediaries were not exorcists; their job was much different. In the normal turn of events, once demonic activity was confirmed the Vatican would immediately assign an exorcist to get rid of the creature. But if the exorcist had reason to suspect that the victim was under direct threat of demonic annihilation, a mediary would be summoned. This holy man would then conduct a sacred ritual that served to open heaven’s doors and allow him to communicate with one of those who had gone before. This special saint would then work in concert with the mediary to arrange protection for the victim, provided such was warranted and always subject to the various protocols in place between the Upper and Lower Kingdoms.

Because of those sacred twelve scattered far and wide across the face of the earth, hope was never absent. Dim, almost invisible at times, but never completely absent.

Knowing that the young woman had actually witnessed demons at play, no doubt the same two waiting for her outside the church doors, Victor addressed the tabernacle and whispered the prescribed prayer in his mother tongue. Afterward, he added, "I have a feeling this one is going to be difficult. I might need more than the usual help to deal with it."

Even if there *were* others present, they would not have heard the reply intended for the ears of this distinguished envoy. "*Έχετε αποτύχει μας ποτέ, Victor?*" Have you ever failed us, Victor?

He smiled, knowing all too well the lyrical accent of Saint Sophia. If events unfolded as they usually did, Sophia would remain his heavenly liaison until he reached the end of this particular assignment. More importantly, this early Roman saint would bring along her own extraordinary gift: wisdom, for that is what her name signified.

When Susan appeared, she was dressed in a red and white altar server's soutane. As the introductions were being made, Victor pointed down at her bandaged feet.

"I ran all the way from the club. There wasn't time to put my shoes on,"

The Greek intermediary took Susan's hand and led her to the front pew, then sat beside her. Father Dumont took a seat directly across the center aisle. Victor cleared his throat and turned toward the frightened girl. "What I need from you now is absolutely everything that happened from say one hour before witnessing the execution until you arrived at the church. Are you up to this, my child?"

Susan took a deep breath, looked up at the altar, over at the priest, and began her story. Shaky though she was, she tried to recall the exact sequence of events.

When she was finished, silence hung heavy inside the sacred edifice. Victor closed his eyes and ran the tips of his fingers across his forehead. Finally, he looked up, not at Susan, but at the altar.

"You know something. In those few minutes while their brazen rite of annihilation was in progress, you, Susan Bartlett, learned something the Underworld sees as a threat. That much is clear. When the man they executed threw out his rays of light, did you manage to catch a look at their faces?"

“Only the one to my right. Long, very dark, big squat nose, a wide mouth, and he – it seemed to be wearing a lopsided grin – at least that was the impression I had at the time.”

“I’m sure you’re right. Grinning devils they are, because demons enjoy their work. What about the eyes?”

“I may have seen tiny yellow slits, but I can’t be sure.” Thinking back, she added, “Perhaps they were sunk into his head.”

“Possibly. And those strange words you overheard – what do you think was being said?”

Susan shrugged her shoulders. “Related to killing that poor man, I should think. But ... their words were not spoken like you and I are speaking right now. It sounded to me more like, well, some sort of phonetically articulated grunt, if you see what I mean.”

“I do indeed,” the mediary replied, knowing very well it was bordering on sacrilege to be discussing such matters inside the Lord’s own house, but at the moment no other safe venue was available. He asked God’s forgiveness before proceeding.

“Now my child, I want you to do your very best to emulate what you heard.”

This was no easy task, but Susan did her best to recall the pitch and caliber of those horrible sounds. “YOMAAL BESH AWAG!” she said aloud.

After she had repeated the words several times, the Greek mediary took out a notebook and wrote in block letters what he thought Susan was saying.

Three very powerful words!

Victor felt a tiny twinge of excitement, for it was now common knowledge among his peers that demons sent to earth were compelled to employ ancient incantations while going about their daily business of creating chaos. But, to the best of his knowledge, this was the first instance of such words being overheard by a human. Victor was convinced those sounds could turn out to be of worthy consequence; though whether or not they were could only be determined by finding out what the words represented. Fortunately, the Vatican had recently developed a sophisticated computer program capable of interpreting the nuances of many ancient languages, even ritualistic incantations used by the Underworld as recorded over the years by Church exorcists. Later in the morning he would return with a digital voice recorder and record Susan speaking those words. At this point Victor Romanos was beginning to wonder about these two murderous creatures. He knew, both from personal experience and from the secrets passed on to him as a young apprentice, that while demons were perceptive and cunning, they were not at all