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**MICHAEL HANLON AND**  
**THE AFRICAN IMPERATIVE**

**Book Two of the Saints and Demons trilogy**

**A NOVEL**

**by**

**Rodney Christian Power**

## **PROLOGUE**

**October, 2012, Hell**

The Great Insurrection was over and done with—finally! Prince Lucifer and senior advisors who chose to remain faithful to their leader had since been banished to the deepest reaches of the Great Abyss, where the once mighty Prince of Darkness was now scorned by all those consigned to hell's eternal fires. Multus, former First Commander of the Armies of Hades and now Lord and Master of the Lower Kingdom, was preparing for his first ever meeting with the newly formed Satanic Governing Council. Lucifer's constant failures to secure earthly tenure for the damned had resulted in his being permanently deposed, but the uprising had lasted a full year of earth time. That acrimonious process was now complete and Multus could at last get down to business.

The new council consisted of twelve senior prefects, seven of whom were newly appointed: Josef Stalin, Idi Amin, Pol Pot, Adolph Hitler, Tomás de Torquemada, Caligula, and for the first time in history, a woman: Ilse Koch, the Bitch of Buchenwald. All were relative newcomers, save for Caligula, and all had something in common: living at least part of their lives in the true service of Evil. Still, the seven had not been chosen at random, but only after much consideration by Lord Multus.

As they came to rest one by one upon the ninth and highest antigravity platform within the great inferno that was hell, Multus greeted each by name, and after his last official had arrived, stood still in the middle of the platform and threw out his mighty arms, “Welcome, welcome! Renowned purveyors of iniquity all!”

Each new commander responded by bowing low and muttering a few words of greeting to his lord and master before commencing the usual slow-march merry-go-round endemic of all demonic sessions. They would continue in this manner, clockwise and always facing inward, until the conference came to an end.

Unlike his predecessor, Multus was not given to temper tantrums. He was calm, reflective, and believed in rewarding effective performance. “My friends, a new era is upon us, and with it, hope for a better future than what we have been cursed to inherit here in the depths of hell—thanks to the fumbling and bumbling of our former leader. True, we have a long and arduous journey ahead of us, and the Kingdom of Heaven with its despicable angels and saints will be on our tails with every step we take. But now, with Lucifer's dismal failures behind us, we must look to new and innovative means to take our rightful heritage on earth.

“You will recall that our first great hope, National Socialism, is all but lost in the ashes of history. The second prospect, a pagan world dominated by communist idealism, is in its final death throes. Yet one cannot fault Herr Hitler or Comrade Stalin for their splendid efforts.”

Multus inclined his enormous crimson head and serrated black horns in the direction of Hitler and Stalin, and they in turn accepted the compliment with phlegmatic nods of their own monstrous skulls.

“Yes, and then along came that other pretentious undertaking—radical Islam, which held out the greatest hope of all, yet it too is in danger of falling victim to Christian ideology. A sad state of affairs. But look around you. What do you see? Yes, some of the most cunning minds in all of human history. This is why I called you together, because the time has come to impart your wisdom on how we are going to extract ourselves from this unjust tenure and move forward. Who will be the first to start?”

After some low murmuring, the renowned father of the Spanish Inquisition, Tomás de Torquemada, spoke up. “Fire and blood, Master. Set the world on fire and drown it in blood. Once the survivors turn their backs on God, chaos will become the order of the day and we can easily step into the fray and declare victory.”

Multus appeared to ponder this, then said, “An admirable goal, surely, and I realize this approach worked well for you, but perhaps we need to begin with something a little less comprehensive. Who is next?”

Former Chancellor Hitler, now a full demon prefect, declared, “Speed is of the essence! Strike at multiple targets. Confuse the enemy. Make him tremble in fear!”

“Ah yes, the famous Blitzkrieg. This too worked well for you, but alas, *our* opponents will not fall back so easily. Still ... attacking on several fronts at the same time does have considerable merit. Next?”

Prefect Stalin gave his own gnarled horns a good toss and said, “Employ economic and political intimidation tactics that will force a breakdown of the natural order and bring humanity to its knees!”

Multus conjured up a tiny grin as he considered these two notorious world leaders. Bitter enemies in life, they had since become sworn compatriots in death. “And yet, this too has been tried before, with less than sterling results. What about Frau Koch, what do you have to say?”

The creator of lampshades made from human flesh twisted her demonic countenance into a sneer and raised both flipper hands over her scaly head. “Inundate the masses with deceit. Plant fear everywhere; make them turn to the powerfully corrupt for protection. Broadcast the big lie!”

Multus had given due consideration to appointing Hitler's Minister of Propaganda to the Council, but thought Frau Koch the better choice. “Excellent! When we are finished here, do go have a word with Herr Goebbels and seek his opinion.”

Once the floor opened for a roundhouse discussion, many more ideas came forth: wide-scale debasement of world governments; declare full-out war against Christianity; secure mind-altering drugs for the masses; collapse the world banking system; infuse key world leaders with evil intent, and so on. But Multus was very aware that Lucifer's five deserters had chosen to remain silent.

Their names were Maloch, Kepach, Regar, Mytel and Yadiaf, none of human origin, but all of whom had actively participated in the original insurrection within the Upper Kingdom that took place not only before the beginning of time, but *because* of the beginning of time. Twisting his massive horned skull in their direction, Multus asked, “Does not one of you have anything to add?”

Due to his close relationship with their former leader, Yadiaf was considered the senior among them. While Lord Multus appeared to be impressed by his newly appointed officials hashing over these old saws, it seemed to Yadiaf that he had missed the obvious. “Master, there are several codes of conduct that exist between the Upper and Lower Kingdoms. We cannot simply march into battle and use whatever means we wish to employ in order to achieve success. Our behaviour is limited in many ways, starting with the original ten protocols set in place at the beginning of time. Look what happened to Hadrian when he chose to ignore the seventh protocol. Has our relationship with the Upper Kingdom recently changed in some manner?”

Multus thought, *Talk about raining on my parade!* “Not at all. But I do not intend to dance to whatever tune *they* wish to play. From now on, our activities will be conducted in a far more aggressive manner, and heaven be damned! If it means relinquishing a few of our earth demons along the way, so be it. Does this offend your sensibilities, Yadiaf?”

But those remarks by Lord Multus only succeeded in elucidating a wide grin from Prefect Yadiaf. “I am not offended, Master. And truly, it pleases me to hear such words.”

“Well and good, because this is how the game is going to be played. Any further comments?”

Prefect Maloch inclined his own enormous skull and said, “An incident took place one year ago concerning a time traveler and the young whelp who came to her aid. A mediary was involved, but he is beyond our reach. To the best of my knowledge, so are the main players, Michael Hanlon and Susan Bartlett.”

“Go on.”

“The Bartlett woman was responsible for our losing out on the Islamic gambit.”

“Indeed,” Multus replied. If anything, he should be grateful that this particular event unfolded as it did. Without it, Lucifer would still be running the show. Still, here in the depths of hell revenge was an essential element, one that had to be encouraged at all times. “Did you have something specific in mind?”

“She and the man-child have since married and reside in Africa. Considering what fools they made of us, I would like to have another crack at them, Master. Is this possible?”

The others were anxious to hear what Multus would say. After all, this might well turn out to be the first real test of his ability to deal with the heavenly forces that were constantly aligned against them.

The new Lord and Master of the Lower Kingdom realized there were certain troubling aspects implicit in Maloch's request, and yet ....

“To travel back in time would mean placing you back inside Prince Lucifer's realm—a potentially dangerous situation even for a senior demon like Prefect Maloch. Great caution would be required. Nevertheless, a successful mission would also serve as a warning to the Upper Kingdom that we mean business. If you are willing to take the risk, I do believe there are certain avenues available to deal with such irritating creatures.”

Multus rearranged his fearsome countenance into a first class demon grin before going on to say, “Should those two prove to be inviolate, you are hereby granted full authority to track down their family and friends and turn their lives into a living hell!”

## CHAPTER ONE

### October, 1950, Mount Peyton

“Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It’s been two weeks since my last confession.”

“Two weeks!” the priest snorted. “So, young man, you think skipping out on confession is okay, do you?”

I thought, here we go again. “No, Father, but when my dad wants to take me somewhere on the weekend, I have to go.”

“I take it there is no church in this godless place?”

“Salvation Army, Father.”

“Ha! You take one step inside their doors and you will lose your immortal soul. Isn’t that what they teach you in school?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Okay, let’s hear what you’ve been up to on this godless trip.”

“Missed morning and night prayers three times, Father.”

“Yes, go on.”

“Not much more, Father.”

“No girls? No impure thoughts?”

Bugger! I could hardly lie in confession. I had no choice but to go on the offensive. “Not much chance of that, Father,” which wasn’t really a lie. “Spent most of our time salmon fishing. Uncle Denny caught a twenty-seven pounder.”

Dead silence. I knew Father O’Reilly well enough to figure out what was going to happen next.

About five seconds went by before I heard him whisper, “Twenty-seven pounds?”

“Two full hours to get him in, Father.”

“*Blessed Jesus!* Point Lemington?”

By now I was grinning from ear to ear. “Yes, Father. A fresh batch was just starting to come in. Dad said they’ll be hanging around another week for sure.”

“Very well, young Charlie Goodyear. You’re off the hook. Three Hail Marys and try not to skip weekly confession. Now say a good Act of Contrition.”

So I did, smirking all the while, thinking it was good thing he couldn’t see me. Black as it was inside the confessional, Father knew all of us by voice alone, so calling me by name was no big deal. Plus, me telling him about Uncle Denny was a sure give-away. Everyone in Mount Peyton knew both men were fish-crazy, so it was a natural chain of events when Father opened the middle door of the confessional and stepped out.

“That’s it for today, folks. Run out of time and have to get going.”

Old Mrs. Hawco stood up and said, “I hope you’re not off fishing, Father O’Reilly, like the last time you pulled out of here like your pants were on fire.”

The priest turned about, smiled at the thirty or so people still waiting to go dump their sins, then winked at me. “What a terrible thing to say about your parish priest, Mary Hawco. Shame on you.”

With that he took off up front, around the altar and a minute later we could hear the sacristy door closing at the back of the church.

“You told him, didn’t you?”

This was Uncle Denny himself, who didn’t come to confession that often, so I was surprised earlier when I saw him march in. Now I was in real trouble, because both he and Dad had warned me to keep my trap shut about that big salmon.

“He tricked it out of me,” I protested.



“Damnation, boy! Every priest from here to Corner Brook is going to know about this.”

I shrugged and left the church, pausing to dip my fingers in the holy water fount, then hustled down the steps before Uncle Denny came out. It was ten twenty on a Saturday morning, almost one year to the day when my best friend Michael Hanlon vanished from the face of the earth. Even though I had secretly been told at the time that he was alive and well, I missed him more than ever. Life just wasn't much fun without Michael around. I'd made new friends, sure, but it wasn't the same. I wandered across the road to his house with my head lowered and feeling kinda down, and by the time I started to climb up the porch steps I was darn close to crying.

Sister Sophia made me solemnly promise that I would never tell another soul what she'd seen fit to pass on regarding the mysterious disappearance of Michael and Sister Catherine on that terrible night that I will never forget as long as I live. But I have to tell you, one year later, that secret was burning to get out. I wasn't sure how much longer I could hold it in.

Michael's little sister Liz was in the front room practicing on the piano. She could see it was me from the big mirror over the piano, so I waved at her and went on into the kitchen. Mrs. Hanlon was just removing a triple loaf of molasses raisin bread from the oven, but when she looked up and saw me, and maybe was able to figure out from the look on my face what was on my mind, she set the pan on the counter and came over to wrap her arms around me.

“Oh Charlie, I know how much it hurts. Not a day goes by when I don't shed a tear. I live for what that strange nun told us about Michael returning home some day.”

I'd heard that a hundred times before, but by now I was getting worried. “Sister Sophia said Michael would write, but a full year has gone by and we haven't heard a word.” I pulled back and stared into Mrs. Hanlon's troubled eyes. “Tell me the truth: Do you think he's still alive?”

“What choice do I have?” These words came out sort of harsh, not at all like Mrs. Hanlon usually spoke. My mother often referred to Mrs. Hanlon as a gentle soul, which she surely was.

But you see, here's the problem: When Bishop Hawkins decided to check into Sister Sophia's authority to speak on behalf of Holy Mother Church, it turned out that both the Presentation Order Motherhouse in Ireland and the Vatican denied any knowledge of a Sister Sophia. Which only added to the mystery. With no one knowing for sure where she came from, or what role she had in Michael's disappearance, we were left wondering how much truth there might be in anything she told us. Only Sgt. Pearson—no longer a Newfoundland Ranger, but a

member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police—seemed not too upset by Michael’s abrupt departure, and everyone knew he was the last person to ever see Sister Sophia. I always wondered if she told him something she didn’t tell the rest of us. Anyway, if I ever decided to share my secret, I was pretty sure Sgt. Pearson would be the one I’d go talk to.

Mrs. Hanlon unwrapped her arms and let me go. “Anything new on the break-in Thursday night?”

That was an odd one. Middle of the night, we heard these strange noises that sounded to me like fireworks going off in the distance, except it seemed to come from somewhere inside our house. Everyone heard it, but we never did see anyone, and when Corporal Shallow came tearing up from the RCMP office, he couldn’t find any evidence of a break-in. Strange. Not only that, but Keitel, our big Newfoundlander, slept through the whole thing. Great guard dog we had there.

“Nope. The Mounties came back the next morning to have another look around, but they didn’t find anything.”

“What about Mel? Any word since he decided to join up?”

Melville was my only brother, eight years my senior and in his third year engineering at McGill in Montreal; that is, until word came down that Canada had just joined the United Nations force getting ready to go fight against the communist hordes trying to overrun the Korean Peninsula. On top of that, according to the BBC announcer, millions of Chinese soldiers had decided to come onboard, so everyone knew it was going to be tough slogging. Mel had been offered a commission in the Royal Canadian Engineers. A former colonel in the Royal Engineers, Dad was naturally pleased to hear this news. Mother wasn’t impressed at all, and made her opinion known at least once a day.

“Yeah, he arrived in British Columbia last week. Place called Camp Chilliwack. Surrounded by mountains, he says. Real pretty.”

Little Liz came into the kitchen and thumped me on the shoulder, a seven-year-old kid’s way of saying hello. She had been trying to show me how to play some tunes on the piano, but it didn’t take long to learn that my talents, whatever they might be, sure didn’t include music. A few chords on the guitar, that was about it. Not like Michael, who could play any instrument that came into his hands, with no clue how to read a note.

When Mrs. Hanlon started in sliding her bread pans out of the oven, I said, “Just going out back,” which meant I was going into Michael’s bedroom. I had pretty well taken up residence

since their only son went away, so I was now more or less a member of the family, which is exactly what Sister Sophia asked me to do.

“Bread will be ready to eat in a few minutes. If you’re interested.”

That made me smile, as she knew it would. Asking me if I was interested in molasses raisin bread fresh out of the oven was like asking if I liked Donna Lane, which I surely did. After two years of tormenting her to death, she finally consented to be my girlfriend. Donna was a year older than me, and without doubt the best-looking girl in Mount Peyton, so this relationship helped take some of the sting out of losing my best friend Michael Hanlon. Since I was nowhere close to being the best-looking boy in town, I knew lots of people were saying it was because Donna Lane had finally seen the light, with my father being manager of the Anglo-Newfoundland Pulp and Paper Mill and probably considered the richest guy around. We also lived in the biggest house, only five doors away from Donna's.

But Mrs. Hanlon’s offer of homemade bread reminded me that only last week Mother sat me down and said, “Now Charles, it’s time you started thinking about your future.” I hadn’t the slightest idea where she was going with that, since I’m just fourteen and only in grade eight.

Then she dropped the bombshell: “You’re going to have to stop eating up at the Hanlons.”

You can imagine my reaction! This was my sacred duty, to stay in close touch with Michael’s family until he returned, which Sister Sophia told me, and only me, would be in ten years time. So I was only doing what I was supposed to do. When I pointed this out to Mother (I wasn't allowed to call her Mom, a term used by the *lower classes* in England, where she came from), her response was, “Charles, Laura Hanlon and I have discussed this at some length, and your father and I have agreed that the only basis on which we are prepared to allow you to continue on like this, is if you lose at least ten pounds. You are much too overweight for your young age, so the choice is yours.”

Since no one in our whole town hated exercise more than me, this ultimatum came as a big shock. My idea of exercise was flipping pages in a book. In the end, after considering the alternatives, I suggested trotting along with Mr. Hanlon while he tended his trap line on weekends, which was a good twelve mile walk up to his cabin at Harmon Lake, another five or so around the loop, then back home the next day. Darn near thirty miles in two days, which I figured was bound to knock off a few pounds. Mind you, I hadn’t done this yet, but at least I’d got Mother’s consent to give it a try.

Of course I wasn't likely to be running into any priests up there in the bush, which meant having to miss Saturday confession. But I have to tell you, that didn't bother me a whole lot. Maybe if and when things between Donna and me started to heat up, I might have to give more thought to saving my immortal soul; but I figured I was okay for the time being because we were still in the kissing stage.

As I often did after walking into Michael's bedroom, I reached out to touch the bullet hole in the tail assembly of that Spitfire sketch over his bed, the one Michael put there the night he and Sister Catherine disappeared. After that I closed my eyes to say my usual prayer asking God for their safe return.

A few minutes later, when I opened Michael's top dresser drawer to remove his little .32 revolver, the mirror revealed a chubby kid carrying around twenty pounds more than he should, just five foot six, without any hope of ever getting to Dad's five eleven; sandy-colored hair, short, because that's the way Mother wanted it, with just enough left on top to bend over. But Michael's mirror also reflected a face filled with the pure innocence of one of God's little cherubs, which came in handy whenever I was in trouble, not that uncommon; even more so back when Michael was around.

As usual, Buster jumped up on the bed and stared up at me with those big gray cat's eyes, waiting for me to ruffle his sleek black and white coat. Buster was the only one who knew the truth about what happened that night when Michael and Sister Catherine vanished from this very room, never to be seen again. Mr. Hanlon was upstairs but heard Buster's screech just before Michael pulled the trigger on my dad's German Luger I loaned him. Then the lights dimmed and by the time Mr. Hanlon arrived with his rifle ready to open fire and the two rangers who were keeping watch on the house came running in, they found the room empty.

Sister Sophia, whoever she was, and wherever she came from, claimed to know what had taken place, and it was common knowledge that she provided an account of those events in order to allow Sgt. Pearson to close off his murder investigation. But that file was dubbed confidential by the authorities in St. John's, in concert with the Vatican, so the story goes; and was *never* going to be made public.

I knew why, of course: because it involved some nasty visitors from the Underworld—Lucifer's buddies—*the demons!*

Michael's bedroom was exactly the way he left it, and it always made me sad whenever I came in and sat on his bed. I edged back until I was resting up against the wall, flicking the revolver open as I did, checking to see if it was loaded; not that there was anyone around who was likely to do that. After giving Buster his usual belly scratch, I started to think back to all the fun Michael and me had together, especially that time we chased down those two crooks who grabbed Sister Catherine right out of school in the middle of the day! Bad things were going on at the time, with two terrible unsolved murders and Sister Catherine's life in constant danger.

I was deep into recalling all this stuff when I heard Sgt. Pearson talking to Mrs. Hanlon. This peaked my interest, but when I caught her sharp intake of breath, I knew something was up. I bolted out to the kitchen and sure enough, both faces looked like death warmed over. Liz was standing in the doorway to the front room with both hands covering her mouth and a look of horror on her teeny face.

"Is it Michael?" I demanded to know.

Mrs. Hanlon reached out and drew me to her. "Not Michael, my darling, but someone very close to you."

Sgt. Pearson was six four and looked great in his new RCMP outfit, not all that different from the one he used to wear, except for the Boy Scout hat he was holding in front of him. He placed his big hand on my shoulder and said, "It's Donna Lane, son. She, well, she ...."

It came as no surprise to me that Sgt. Pearson knew of our budding relationship; after all, Mount Peyton was a small community and most everyone knew what was going on. I pulled away from Mrs. Hanlon. "Donna's gone over to Corner Brook for her sister's wedding. She's not even in town."

Sgt. Pearson lowered his head, then looked at Mrs. Hanlon before saying anything else. "That's right, son, Harry and Dot took her with them, but right after the ceremony yesterday afternoon Donna went missing. They found her around nine this morning."

I waited, but it soon became clear that Sgt. Pearson was having trouble getting more words out, so Mrs. Hanlon said, "Charlie, perhaps it would be better if you went home and spoke to your parents."

Not likely! "Tell me!"

That's when I noticed the tears running down Mrs. Hanlon's cheeks. So my heart was already in my throat when she said, "Someone took her, Charlie, and they ... they killed her."

There, it was out, and worse than I ever could have imagined. My girlfriend, beautiful fifteen-year-old Donna Lane, was dead.

I backed up to the nearest kitchen chair and sat down. So many things were racing through my mind that I could hardly keep up. I was even mad at Michael, because I figured if he was still around this wouldn't have happened. Which was a dumb thing to think. Sgt. Pearson took the other end of the table while Mrs. Hanlon went into the pantry.

A minute later she came out with a tiny glass of rum. "I want you to drink this," she said, and when I screwed up my face she put the glass to my lips and ordered me to drink it.

So I did, and the stuff burned its way down to my stomach and my eyes started to water. "Do you want another one?" she asked. I said I didn't, and then Liz came over and laid her head on my shoulder. She didn't say anything, but I could feel the shudders running through her body. Even Buster seemed to know something bad was happening, because he started making really low resonance noises, like a frog. I'd never heard him make that kind of sound before. I wondered if he was feeling sorry for me too.

By the time I raised my head and looked over at Sgt. Pearson, tears were streaming down my cheeks. I made no effort to brush them away.

"I'm truly sorry, son. I didn't want to be the one to break the news, but you had to find out sooner or later; so, well, I figured I might as well track you down."

"Yes, sir, I understand." I sniffed a few times before asking, "Do Donna's mom and dad know?"

His lips went tight for a moment before he answered. "I just spoke to Sgt. Gardiner over in Corner Brook. Her parents have been duly informed."

"Did they catch the killer?"

"Simple answer—no. But there's a strong indication that there were, ah, outside influences."

Mrs. Hanlon placed a Kleenex in my hand, so I began wiping away the tears. Somehow, I understood what he meant by *outside influences*, and even though I dreaded asking the next question, I had to. "How can you tell?"

Sgt. Pearson was looking real hard at the bottle of screech Mrs. Hanlon was still holding in her hand. I'm sure he would have liked to down a snort or two, but of course he was on duty.

He said, “The evidence is compelling, even conclusive. But I won’t be revealing any of the details. You’ll have to take my word for it.”

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **October, 1950, West Africa**

My name is Michael Hanlon and I live in a twenty-foot-square canvas tent with my incredibly beautiful wife Susan in a tiny native village located in the far away land of Cameroon in western Africa. The tent was originally set up by a pair of National Geographic photographers who used it as their headquarters for over a year. This is our first anniversary, although the only thing I had to give Susan was an orange-bellied parrot I carved out of a piece of elephant tusk. She didn't know I had been working on it while she was off trying to teach the Pygmies some English, which is a bit trickier than teaching it to little kids in Mount Peyton, the job she had when I met her. Sister Catherine, she was back then, of the Presentation Order of nuns. Susan was impressed with the carving, and I have to say it wasn't half bad, though it was a long way from dinner out in some exotic restaurant, or a nice piece of jewelry, which I know women love. Mind you, there's a real parrot tied to a tree branch just outside the tent, a gift from one of the children just after we settled in. Susan named her Tangerine. We also own a crowned guenon, which in case you don't know, is a monkey, and also a favorite dish of the Baka Pygmies, who



like to get them drunk on cassava beer before roasting them over an open fire—something to do with flavor. Fortunately for us, Susan was raised on a farm and my dad was a part-time trapper, so having to live up-close and personal with our food supply wasn't a big problem. But the Pygmies had strict orders to keep their hands off Cardinal Bellini, as Susan called our monkey, after that old church guy in Rome who was prepared to sacrifice us to the devil.

I've learned a lot about love and sex and those sorts of things during the past year, and Susan thinks I'm pretty smart for a twenty-two-year-old. I really enjoy my work: tracking down, analyzing and then writing up reports on the behavioral ecology and interaction of small mammals and bird species in this uncharted part of the world. But I have to tell you that deep down I'm still that twelve-year-old kid the Powers-That-Be decided to fast-forward by adding ten years to my biological age, just so I could catch up with the girl I love, who also happens to be twenty-two. I know, it sounds complicated, but there it is. And sure, Susan and me are deliriously happy down here in Africa hanging out with our great Pygmy family. In fact, things couldn't be much better.

And yet ....

I think about my parents and my little sister Liz all the time, and about my best friend Charlie Goodyear. I miss them terribly. I know the demons that followed Susan to Mount Peyton can't touch my parents because that's what Susan's friend, Saint Sophia, told us. She said, at the end of that terrifying night back in Rome when the demon Hadrian kept trying to kill us: *I have made certain that Lucifer's underlings will not torment you or your family again. From this moment on, you will be impervious to demonic intent ....* Of course that didn't mean we were impervious to *human* intent. A bullet, or a falling tree for that matter, could still put any one of us out of business. Still, knowing that Mom and Dad and Liz were safe from the evil things me and Susan had to fend off was great; but Charlie was on his own, and this bothered me a lot.

It took me a long time to figure out what I could put in a letter to Mom and Dad. I hated having to lie, but I couldn't tell them what we were doing, or where we were, or that I was actually *married* to Sister Catherine, who wasn't Sister Catherine at all, but Susan Bartlett, now Susan Hanlon, or that I made love to her every night, and often during the day, much to the delight of the Pygmies who I noticed found our constant love-making pretty funny. Or that my wife sometimes went around like the local women, with nothing at all on top. I mean, how was I

going to be able to explain *that* to my parents? Telling them stuff like that might even make them think I was off my rocker. Anyway, this is what I finally came up with:

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*I hope everyone is staying safe and no more bad things are happening back there. I'm sorry Sister and me had to leave that night, but there was a pretty serious reason why we had to get moving. Sister's life was in danger again, but this time someone from the Church got involved and suggested I come along because Sister felt I was able to look after her, and so far I have. We are both well and in good health but far away from Mount Peyton so I won't be able to come home for a long time. I really miss everyone and I want you to tell Liz I even miss her. Tell Charlie I would love him to be here with me, because I know he would enjoy it. There's not much more I can say right now. Sister Catherine sends her love. Give Buster a hug for me. I'll write again in a little while.*

*Your son,*

*Michael Hanlon*

*25 June 1950 (This is Sister's birthday)*

I worded the letter in the manner I would have done if I was still twelve and mailed it two months ago, or at least I gave it to Captain Arrengio of the little riverboat *Rodin*, which comes by once a month with our supplies. But I had to address it to the Vatican in Rome, as Susan was instructed by Saint Sophia, probably because no one outside of some special Church people are supposed to know where we are. So it's anyone's guess when it might arrive in Mount Peyton. There was no point of Susan writing to her parents, because they're not even born yet, and in fact Susan won't be born until 1989; and you see, I was born in 1937, so in reality I'm fifty-two years older than Susan. If you want to understand how that all works, you will have to ask Susan. She can explain it better than me. Talking about age differences, Susan says if any children happen to come along, that's not going to go down too well if and when we do make it back to Mount Peyton. I mean, I was twelve years old when I left home just last year, so if I were to show up in nine years time with Susan on one arm and say, a seven-year-old daughter on the other arm, that's going to look pretty weird to Mom and Dad.

Still, we've sure not done anything to stop babies from coming into the world, having decided early on to leave that matter entirely in Sophia's hands. Since this whole age difference state of affairs was her idea, Susan is certain she would have considered that particular dilemma.

Susan also ventured the idea that the other reason we're tucked away down here in the heart of the African rainforest is because our mixed-era relationship cannot impact how the future is going to unfold. Heavy slogging for me, that's for sure. Anyway, it seemed like each and every little kid around here has taken to Susan like their second mother, so maybe we didn't need any children of our own.

By now I expect you're wondering about this Saint Sophia I keep talking about. That's another long story, but I'll shorten it for you: When Susan got into trouble with the Underworld by accidentally witnessing something she wasn't supposed to see, the demons from hell went all out to kill her, but the Church sent this elderly Greek by the name of Victor Romanos to rescue her. Dr. Romanos is a Church intermediary capable of direct communication with those who have gone before. He wasted no time getting in touch with his contact, Saint Sophia, who in turn arranged for Susan to be sent back in time, from the year 2011 where she was taking medicine at Columbia University in New York City, to the year 1949 in Mount Peyton, Newfoundland, where she became an overnight member of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and ended up teaching grades one and two English in my school, St. Paul's Academy. There she was supposed to be safe from her would-be assailants, which of course didn't happen. Prince Lucifer's gang tracked her down anyway, and that's when things started to heat up in my little hometown. I'll leave the rest for later, because that part is even more complicated.

I stared down at the monthly report I had been preparing for my employer, the Smithsonian Institute. How we both came to be working for such a renowned organization is still a mystery to us. Susan even suggested that the Smithsonian and the Vatican might be working together, which I suppose is not out of the realm of possibility. Every month an envelope arrives from Washington with specific instructions as to the type of birds and/or mammals we should be documenting, along with 1200 U.S. in 100 dollar notes—800 for me, and 400 for my executive assistant, Susan Hanlon. Since there is hardly anything to spend money on down in this end of the continent, Susan figured by the time we pulled out in 1959, we'd have a tidy little sum stashed away. Maybe even enough to buy a house. Oh, I forgot to tell you, when that happens, Susan and I will still be twenty-two years old. Pretty neat, hey?

On top of all that, I inherited another bonus: Susan's sense of humor. There is not an hour in the day when the village doesn't ring out with her laughter. Susan finds most anything funny; in fact it not at all unusual for her to break into laughter while we're making love. Took me some

time to get used to that. She says it is because of the way her life has unfolded. First a farm girl from Indiana, then a student at Columbia University in New York, then a piano player at an upscale club in downtown Manhattan, then a teaching nun in Mount Peyton, and finally, married to a research scientist in the heart of equatorial Africa. And still only twenty-two. For some reason, this unbelievable journey continues to strike her as hilarious.

Then there's our wonderful old upright Heintzman, which is perched on a wooden platform in one corner of our new home. This is a gift from St. Sophia, and it comes from the grade four classroom where I went to school and where Susan used to teach English to the kids. The piano arrived by riverboat all packed up nicely in a big wooden crate just a few hours after our wedding ceremony ended right here in the middle of the Pygmy village. It was because of the Heintzman that Susan and I met, and we thought it incredibly considerate of Sophia to give it to us. Mind you, how she managed to pull that off is anyone's guess, especially when the shipping manifest showed it had started out its journey from Mount Peyton on the twenty-fifth of June, three months before Susan and I even met—which by the way, happens to be Susan's birthday. However, based on a few other endeavors we witnessed Sophia perform in her struggle against those demons intent on our execution, getting the piano to us was no big deal. All I can tell you is that certain people who have become saints are capable of pulling off those kinds of miracles.

Talking about miracles, Pygmies aren't Christian, but it seemed to us that they live better lives than most Christians, so Susan and me decided early on that we weren't going to mess about with their spiritual beliefs, which I have to say are pretty simple. Near as we can tell, they revere a forest spirit known as *Jengi*, who they consider both a parental figure and guardian. So we figured if this is the way they've been conducting themselves for the last few thousand years, who are we to interfere?

The piano was a big hit with the Pygmies, who it turns out are pretty musically inclined anyway. They love to sing, although the pleasant harmony they create is a lot different from what you hear back home, and they have a dozen or so homemade stringed instruments and various drums of course, which allows them to produce all kinds of interesting rhythmic sounds. Actually, they don't so much sing as yodel, like people do over in the Swiss Alps, except the Pygmies do theirs in a kind of forceful rhythmic harmony, which in the rainforest setting can be almost hypnotic. Keeping the piano in tune was a problem—it rained most every afternoon, so the humidity was stifling. By now, thanks to Susan and the supply of music books crammed into

the piano bench, I knew how to play by music; nowhere as good as Susan, but not bad. I finally had that opening to Rachmaninoff's Second down pat. Whenever we were at home—because on occasion we had to wander off into the forest for a few days in pursuit of some elusive bird or mammal—not an evening went by without the sound of our great old Heintzman floating through the village.

The Pygmies loved our music and several have since learned to play simple pieces Susan taught them, even to the point of being able to duplicate the peculiar melodies they played on their stringed instruments, much to the delight of the rest of the villagers. And, it seemed only natural for Susan and me to learn to play their instruments, which we now did on a regular basis. Other than marriage, childbirth or coming of age ceremonies for the boys, they also put on a big celebration when the hunting party returned with a significant kill—like an elephant! Yeah, turns out the little guys are considered top-notch elephant hunters, something I think is not so well known in the rest of the country.

Of course, there are a few problems living out here in the wilds of Africa. Having to beat off swarms of flies is a big nuisance, more for Susan than for me, because I grew up in central Newfoundland where co-existing with clouds of nippers and black flies was no big deal. According to one of the books we were given, we were supposed to have been inoculated against yellow fever, but I guess our sudden arrival from Rome more or less ruled that out.

Cameroon supposedly has over nine hundred species of birds, three hundred and twenty species of mammals, two hundred species of amphibians and two hundred and fifty species of reptiles, the deadliest of which is the mamba. One night not long after our arrival, a huge black mamba somehow managed to wiggle through our zipped-up tent doorway, despite the fact that part of our nightly ritual was to sprinkle kerosene across the entrance to keep out spiders and fire ants. Didn't deter this nasty character, I can tell you. Fortunately, Cardinal Bellini spotted the slimy devil in the process of breaking in, and let out a chorus of screeches that woke the whole village. Still, by the time I unzipped our mosquito netting around the bed, the ten-foot-long reptile had already made its way behind our equipment crates and out of sight, so we couldn't figure out why the monkey was so upset until I untied the Cardinal and turned him loose inside the tent. He immediately leaped upon the wooden crates and screeched even louder.

Well, I didn't have to be a genius to figure something bad was hiding out behind those crates, so I grabbed the Remington bolt action .22, one of two guns sent out by the Smithsonian

to help round up my specimens, loaded it up, then started pulling back the crates with Susan standing naked on the bed holding the kerosene lantern up high so I could see. As ready as I was for trouble, I almost got bitten when the creature sprung right up at my throat! I barely had time to leap aside, but then started cranking that old bolt action as fast as I could. Eventually, our late night visitor stopped moving, and of course by that time every male Pygmy in the village had crowded around our canvas doorway to take in the show.

That shook us up, but I have to say Susan didn't panic or anything like that. She just went quiet afterward and I had to hold her real tight before she could go back to sleep. Later that day old George explained to me that if the mamba *had* bitten me, it was a one-way street. Death would arrive within minutes. There was no antidote. Then again, because the Pygmies used various poisons on the tips of their arrows and spears, being able to milk the snake's poison was a bonus for them; and afterwards Mr. Mamba ended up the same way most every other creature did, being cut into foot long chunks and roasted over an open fire. In Pygmy culture, nothing is wasted.

In case you're interested, aside from powdered milk, toilet paper and other basic staples sent to us by the Smithsonian, our food was usually one kind of monkey or another, and I noticed early on that their meat tasted like rabbit with peanut butter smeared on it. Not bad at all. We didn't eat the various grubs and insects the women rounded up, but we ate most everything else, including some of the most beautiful birds you can ever imagine.

Anyway, this morning Susan and me were getting ready to go upriver to try and track down the Giant Pangolin, or scaly anteater. Since these critters tended to be nocturnal, they're not that easy to find. This month we were into locating the habitats of larger mammals, which, after they were measured, weighed, photographed, dissected, and the stomach contents analyzed, our specimens then became just another addition to the Pygmy food larder. As often as not, we would end up eating them ourselves, something my wife found a bit hard to swallow at first, if you'll pardon the pun. But she's okay with it now.

Susan was tying the camera tripod to her backpack and I was scooping up a few more rolls of film for our big Kodak when old George appeared in the doorway to our tent. George happens to be the only Pygmy in the village who knows a few words of English, which has been a blessing for us as we worked our way through the time-consuming process of learning to speak French, thanks to our wind-up record player and the Smithsonian's *Learn to Speak French* twelve

record set. Why French, you might ask? Because Cameroon is a French country, and oddly enough, several of the Pygmies spoke French reasonably well. And yes, we also know a few words of Baka, but I have to tell you, this is one difficult language to speak.

Standing in the doorway, he said, “Bad.”

Okay, bad. Something, or someone, was bad. “What is bad?” Susan asked.

George jammed his walking stick in the ground and wrapped his right leg around it. “Bantu.”

The Bantu were the predominant African race that lived up here in the deep rainforest, and we knew they considered the Pygmies no more than any other animal in the forest. They were farmers as well as hunters and usually had permanent settlements, unlike the Pygmies who pulled up stakes and moved on whenever their food supply was running low. But the Bantu often raided Pygmy villages to rape and kill and take the little people for slaves, and, believe it or not, to eat. Yeah, the Bantu eat Pygmies. Sad, but true. There was also the question of devil worship, a little gem Captain Arrengio had seen fit to pass on one day when he was in a sharing mood. Certain Bantu tribes were big into this stuff, which involved human sacrifice, and guess who they used as sacrifices? Yup, the little guys.

So George telling us the Bantu were bad was not exactly news.

Susan asked, “Are the Bantu nearby?”

It took George a full minute to come up with an answer. “Bantu upriver. Bad. You go upriver, bad.”

Ah, so now we had the message. George was trying to warn us that a Bantu hunting party might be passing through the area we were heading into, and this prompted me to reach down into one of my supply boxes and remove the .45 Colt the Smithsonian sent us. Much better than a .22 when it came to stopping a decent-sized animal, or humans if it came down to that. The semi-automatic was standard U.S. Army issue, just like one of Colonel Goodyear's Charlie and me used to fire all the time. Tried this one out when it first arrived, and found it to be in good condition and the sights dead accurate. I strapped on the belt and holster it came with while Susan, George and the morning gathering of children looked on in silence.

“Surly you don't intend going up there now,” my wife finally ventured.

I patted the Colt and asked George, “Do the Bantu have guns?”

George squished his oversize lips a few times then said, “No.”

So I turned to Susan and smiled down at her. “There, no guns. I fire off a shot, they're sure to scamper away. Don't worry. You can carry the .22 if you want.”

Then Susan's sense of humor returned. “Oh well, if they threaten us, we can start making faces, jump up and down and pretend we've gone over the edge. I understand the Bantu are afraid of crazy people.”



## CHAPTER THREE

### Mount Peyton

“You mind if I sleep over tonight?” I asked Mrs. Hanlon.

She gave me an odd look before replying. “Charlie, you know you're welcome here anytime, but you'll have to get your mother's permission for that.”

I nodded. That could be a problem. I blew my nose and stuffed the Kleenex in my shirt pocket. It just didn't seem real to me that Donna Lane was dead. But why? I was pretty sure Donna wasn't a threat to anything that went on down there in hell. So why should the demons want to take her young life? I wondered if this wasn't something that had carried over from last year, when the demons came to town and executed old Paddy Ryan and Sister Clare in a God-awful manner. Of course we found out later that their real target was Sister Catherine. But Sister was gone now, vanished into the night along with my best friend Michael Hanlon.

Sgt. Pearson was watching me pretty close, probably could hear my brain spinning around. Not sure why, but I felt a strong urge to sleep in Michael's bed. I stood up, a bit unsteady, and said, “I'll go ask. Be right back.”

I went out through the front room onto the veranda and down the steps. Liz and Buster followed me out. Liz didn't say anything, but I could see she was sniffing away. I guess since Michael's departure I had more or less taken his place, so she was feeling sorry for me. My house was on the other side of Church Road and only five doors down the street from the Hanlons. The temperature was just starting to take a nose dive and I figured we'd have snow before the day was out, but the heavy sulfur fumes spiraling out of the mill smokestack were blowing the other way, which meant we could breathe without choking to death. Then it occurred to me that when I agreed to try and lose some weight by going along with Mr. Hanlon while he tended his trap line, I hadn't considered walking thirty miles in snowshoes.

But that day-to-day stuff was all on the back burner now.

Mother already knew about Donna when I walked into the house. So did our maid, Abigail, because I could see she was in shock. Mother was in her study, working away on God knows what. Whatever it was, she always locked it up in her safe after she was finished. And unlike Dad's safe, I didn't know the combination to hers. She rose at once and came out into the hall where she actually placed one arm around my shoulder. For her, this was big. Growing up, Mother always seemed to treat my brother Mel like he was the rightful heir to the throne, so to speak, and I was just the spare. The Heir and the Spare, that's us.

My mother was tall and skinny, almost as tall as Dad, and walked with a slight limp. She didn't have a lot of meat on her bones and usually went around wearing a serious Joan Crawford-style look. I knew she was a good person at heart, but still .... Mel used to say he could never figure out what Dad saw in her when they first met in jolly old England back in nineteen twenty-six when my dad was still a young second lieutenant. Since Lord and Lady Melville were several notches above his station in life, I suspected things would have turned out differently if they hadn't both died in the April 8, 1941 bombing raid on Coventry. Now, considering that Edith Melville Goodyear was a big fish in a very small pond, I was pretty sure she still yearned to be back home in England, even if it meant being a small fish in a big pond.

"Lionel called from the mill," she said, looking at me over her reading glasses. "Their people in Corner Brook radioed over with the news. I am so sorry. She was a sweet child. Would you care for some tea?"

I felt like telling her that Mrs. Hanlon had already given me a snort of rum, but that might have caused a heart attack. "I want to sleep over tonight, in Michael's bed. That okay?"

Her eyebrows came together, as they usually did before she laid down the law. “Charles, you practically live up at the Hanlons as it is. I cannot possibly allow you to sleep there. Really! Next thing I expect Laura Hanlon will be filing for adoption.”

Anyone else, I'd have considered there might have been a smidgeon of levity in that remark. But not with my mother. She never cracked a smile, and never, ever laughed. No wonder I spent all my time up at the Hanlons. I often had the feeling that if a sister had come along, the old gal might have loosened up a bit. Mother went around in her long Victorian skirts and long-sleeve blouses apparently living in her own dream world. The only thing that seemed to brighten her up was getting ready for Dad's semi-annual trip back to England when he reported in to Lord Northcliffe's heirs that everything was in good shape here at their mill.

I shrugged and said okay, then went into the kitchen to get a drink of water because my throat was still burning from the rum. After dumping my short pants in favor of my new tan corduroys, I grabbed my green bomber jacket off the hall rack and was on my way out the front door when the telephone rang. No sign of Abigail or Molly, our cook, and Mother *never* answered the telephone, so I backed up to our little hallway table and took up the receiver. “Goodyear residence.”

“*Charles!*”

This was Dad, but it sure wasn't his normal tone of voice. “Yes, sir. I heard about Donna.” I said that because I figured this is why he was upset.

Boy, was I wrong.

“Did you know Roy Kelly took off after work yesterday afternoon and drove out to Point Lemington to go fishing?”

“But I never mentioned anything about Uncle Denny's big salmon to Jerry!” I have to tell you that I didn't appreciate his concern about a stupid old fish when Donna Lane had just been murdered. Jerry was Roy Kelly's son, and the family had only just moved from Botwood in time to start the school year. A funny kid with a great imagination who worshipped the Hardy Boys, Jerry reminded me so much of Michael that he had become my new best friend.

“Charles, listen to me. We just received a radio transmission telling us Jerry was pulled out of their tent somewhere in the middle of the night. They thought it was a bear, but it wasn't. His body was discovered just one hour ago. Son, I'm truly sorry to have to tell you that Jerry's

been murdered too. As near as I can make out, it sounds like the same kind of problem we had around here last year.”

Well, that really nailed me to the cross. Donna and Jerry, gone, and executed demon style, if I understood what Dad was telling me.

I didn't say anything. I mean, what could I say?

“Charles, are you okay?”

I took a deep breath. I sure wasn't okay, but I said I was.

“We'll discuss this later. If you run into Sgt. Pearson, have him give me a call.”

I said sure, and hung up. The two people nearest to me, Charlie Goodyear, had just been murdered! It had to mean something. I tore off into Dad's gun room, went behind his desk and began rotating the dial on his big Johnson safe. Dad kept his handguns in there, so I removed my favorite German Luger and a handful of 9mm cartridges which I let dribble into my side pocket. He kept the big stuff up in the attic, weapons he had managed to collect and bring home after the war, including a rocket launcher and three heavy machine guns. Michael and me got in trouble more than once for fooling around with those.

Sitting in Dad's chair pushing bullets down into the magazine, I realized that the horror of losing Donna and Jerry had already moved aside to allow something else to take up residence: *fear!* The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced Dad was right: the same problem we had here last year had come back. I wasn't so sure a 9mm slug could stop a demon, but I wanted to be ready anyway, just in case they came after me next.

By the time I arrived back at the Hanlon's, Sgt. Pearson had already left. “He received a radio call,” Mrs. Hanlon told me. “Then he was out of here quick as a bunny. Probably related to Donna's murder.”

I hesitated telling her about Jerry, but I knew it wouldn't be long before word leaked out. “Maybe so, but I just spoke to Dad. Jerry Kelly was killed too. Same way as Donna.”

Only then did she notice the bulge in my bomber jacket. I raised one corner to confirm her suspicions. She took both my hands and pulled me close. “Dear God, whenever is this going to end?”

I remembered then that she and Mr. Hanlon had been in with Sgt. Pearson when Sister Sophia called them all together after Sister Clare's funeral. “Mrs. Hanlon, no one ever told me

what that strange nun said to you guys that day in Father O'Reilly's study. I'd like to know, if you don't mind."

Mrs. Hanlon let go of my hands and pulled out my usual chair for me to sit on, then she lifted the kettle from back of the coal stove and filled it with cold water from the tap. Liz took her father's seat at the head of the table. Buster came over and flopped across my right foot. I knew Mr. Hanlon was on day shift, so I expected he would be coming through the door in a little bit, looking for his dinner.

Kettle on the front and the fire stoked up, Michael's mom turned to me and said, "You're right about her being a strange one. She even faced down the bishop, which was something to behold. She told us there was no need to worry about the demon, because he was gone and wouldn't be coming back. The way she put it was ... something about it being unlikely we would ever again encounter that sort of activity in Mount Peyton."

Years of reading about every escapade the Hardy Boys ever got involved in allowed me to pick up a note of caution in that statement: ... *activity in Mount Peyton*. "Did she say it exactly like that?"

Mrs. Hanlon pushed her nice blond hair back off her forehead. All the kids agreed Mrs. Hanlon looked a lot like Betty Grable, except her hair was a few shades darker. After a moment's pause, she said, "I believe so. She clearly wanted to put us at ease."

Well, Corner Brook and Point Lemington were a long way from Mount Peyton, so if Sister Sophia was indicating that only people inside the town limits were safe; well then, it seemed to me like this might be worth considering. I had to go see Sgt. Pearson anyway, so I was anxious to run that by him.

"What did your mother say, about sleeping over?"

"She said no."

Mrs. Hanlon wrapped me in her arms, as she often did, and said, "My darling, Michael's bed is yours, whenever you get permission that is. And Charlie, I'm sure you know full well that having you come visit us all the time has really helped Jack and I deal with Michael's absence. I want you to always consider this house your second home."

I returned her hug and said, "Given a choice, I'd rather live here any day."

She backed away. "You shouldn't say things like that. Are you staying for dinner?"

"Nah, I gotta go find Sgt. Pearson. I'll catch something at home later."

On my way downtown, the twelve o'clock mill whistle blew, so in a few minutes tons of men and cars and bikes would be on the road with the fellows on day shift rushing to get home, have their dinner and a quick nap before tearing off again back to the mill to punch their time cards before the one o'clock whistle blew. Walking up the twenty-three steps from street level to Sgt. Pearson's office on top of the courthouse, I realized this place was no longer the Ranger Station I had grown up with. With Newfoundland joining Canada only last year, it was now RCMP Central Headquarters and Sgt. Pearson had eight men under him, a hundred percent increase from last year when he was a Ranger with the same rank and doing the same job. Dad said he hoped those bigwigs up in Ottawa weren't expecting a similar increase in our crime rate.

Inside the office, Daisy Baird was banging away on her black Underwood, probably getting started on Donna's murder. She almost burst into tears when she saw me, and rushed around her desk to grab me and pull me in for a giant hug. Far as I knew, Daisy was the biggest gal we had in Mount Peyton, so getting a hug from her could be risky.

“Sgt. Pearson in?” I asked in a muffled tone.

She drew back and said, “He's on the line to Corner Brook, you know. He ...” And that's as far as she got before her tears broke loose. I edged back a little so I could breathe and took a chair up against the back wall. Don't know how she didn't notice my Luger, but maybe she was used to seeing me and Michael carry guns around and thought nothing of it. A quick glance to my right told me one of the holding cells had been made into an office, which I suppose they had to do because of the staff increase. When I told Daisy I would wait, she went back behind the counter and went on pecking on her typewriter, sniffing away. Didn't make me feel any better, I can tell you.

After awhile Sgt. Pearson came out and seemed surprised to see me. “You okay, son?”

Sgt. Pearson was pretty tall, so with him standing up and me sitting down made for a serious crick in my neck. I decided to stand up too. “No, sir, I am definitely not okay, but I wanted to come over and talk to you.”

He glanced down at the bulge in my bomber jacket, and I'm sure he knew what was making it. “About Donna?”

“Donna, sure. But now my two best friends in this town are dead. I—”

“Son, what are you talking about?”