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MICHAEL HANLON AND
THE BELGIAN SANCTION

Book Three of the Saints and Demons trilogy

A NOVEL

By

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The Old Testament records 158 episodes where God personally conducted an execution or commanded they be carried out in His name. Estimates of the dead range from 2.8 million to 25 million. Women, children, and animals were often included.

The Bible also states that God never changes.

CHAPTER ONE

Mid November, 1950, Mount Peyton

Just this morning while I was out in our front porch getting ready to leave for school, Saint Sophia of Rome touched down. She stayed no more than five minutes, just long enough to greet me and my mother and to inform our special guests they were to leave within the hour.

This was the worst news possible.

My best friend in the whole world was about to take off—again! Michael Hanlon and his scrumptious wife Susan, a former Presentation Order nun who used to teach grade one English at our school, had only just arrived back home, thanks to the miraculous efforts of Sophia's daughters Faith and Hope Romanga, both famous saints like their mother. Since then me and Michael have been making the most of his homecoming by going over all the exciting things that happened to both of us after he and Susan vanished from sight this time last year.

I knew it was only a matter of time before our local residents began to suspect something unusual was going on with the handsome young couple currently visiting the mill manager's home. The names they had decided to go with were Michael and Susan Bartlett, because Bartlett was Susan's family name. Our cook, Molly, had already voiced her opinion about the amazing

resemblance between this older Michael and the younger Michael who used to live just up the street.

Well, no wonder. They happened to be the same person, that's why.

Ten years older, of course. Probably the strangest thing that ever happened to anyone, but I'll tell you more about that later. Saint Sophia, gloriously radiant in her lemony toga with her shiny black hair reaching down to her waist, glided out to the porch to break the news about Michael's leaving, then gave me a little hug before saying goodbye. This was pretty special, considering who she was. Still, given a choice I would have preferred to get a hug from her oldest daughter any day. Then our visiting saint withdrew and faded from sight just like the last time she came to visit us.

I wasted no time shucking my gaiters before marching back into the dining room. Michael and Susan were standing there holding hands and looking kinda dejected. I said, "This is the shits!"

My tall, elegant mother was standing too, at the head of the table, all dressed up in a two-tone rose-colored woolen sweater and gray pleated skirt that looked real nice on her. The special gift Sophia's daughter Faith told me she left behind Tuesday morning before heading off to Russia, turned out to be nothing less than the complete healing of the many scars inflicted by the Nazis while torturing Mom to learn the whereabouts of her compatriots in the French Resistance. Now, seven years after that horrifying experience, my mother could finally dress like a normal person.

My dad, Colonel Goodyear, was in charge of our local pulp and paper mill. He'd already left for work. I could tell Mom didn't like the news either. She tilted her head and threw me a sympathetic look. "Charles, you know very well it is much too problematic for Michael and Susan to remain in Mount Peyton."

I shrugged off her remark and said, "It's still not fair!"

I'd just lost Donna Lane and Jerry Kelly, my two closest friends in the world after Michael took off. Then Faith and her sister Hope came up with a way to bring Michael and Susan back home, which was great! Now they were jumping ship again. I flung out both hands and said, "So where does that leave me?"

Okay, I admit I was feeling sorry for myself. But come on, only two weeks ago both my girlfriend and my closest friend next to Michael were brutally murdered by the demon Maloch.

And just after that happened, Faith, who was just twelve years old when she died, almost broke my heart in two by pulling out the very next day after Michael and Susan returned home.

So here we were, three days later, and I'm about to lose touch with Michael for the second time! All those emotional ups and downs were starting to get to me.

"I'm not going to school today," I declared to anyone who might be interested.

Susan was tall, the same height as Mom, and she was wearing one of Mom's long-sleeve blouses, the lavender one dotted with falling leaves. She also had on a pair of Mom's leather riding pants. The outfit didn't really match up, but on Susan anything looked good. Mind you, she'd arrived here from Casablanca dressed up like a harem girl, and I can tell you seeing her in that getup was a serious eye-knocker.

She came around the table and placed both hands on my shoulders. "Charlie, I'm so sorry about this, but you must have known our coming back here was only temporary."

Michael came over and joined her. Even though he was one year younger than me, in order to be able to marry Susan, Saint Sophia went ahead and arranged for him to get a whole new adult body, making him in effect way older than my fourteen years.

He ruffled my hair and said in a serious tone, "I know it's a bugger, but what else can we do? My ten-year growth spurt rules out any chance of our hanging around home. God knows we'd rather stay in Mount Peyton. But Sophia says that's not possible."

Rats! I could already feel the tears welling up. No surprise there, considering all we just went through to get Michael home. I sniffed them away and said, "So when are you coming back to stay?"

Susan gave Michael a quick glance before saying, "You already know the answer. It's when Michael's real age catches up to his physical growth. That's nineteen fifty-nine, Charlie."

"Another nine years!"

I was suddenly aware of our cook standing in the doorway behind me. But Molly's seen and heard so many strange things over the last two weeks that I didn't bother trying to guard what I was saying to keep her from learning the truth. Tuesday morning, after returning from Africa with three more people than we left home with, Mom told Molly and our maid Abigail that Hope was Faith's sister and that the fine-looking young couple who had appeared on our doorstep were distant relatives.

I looked up at Michael. "Are you going back to Africa?"

“Lord, I hope not! She told us they hadn’t settled on a destination just yet.”

They, meaning the heavenly bigwigs, I assumed.

When Mom walked over to join us, she must have given Molly a look that told her this was a private affair, because she spun around and retreated back to the kitchen. I listened to her head off Abigail, on her way in to collect our breakfast dishes.

Mom said to Michael, “I couldn’t help noticing Saint Sophia seemed reluctant to answer when you asked her where you were going. I had a feeling she knew but for some reason didn’t wish to tell you.”

Susan, probably the best looking nun in history, nodded her gorgeous strawberry blond head at Mom. “You’re right. She did appear uncomfortable. Which seems odd after all we’ve been through together.”

Michael said, “Yeah, but the last time we left town our destination was kept secret, so this is nothing new.”

I chimed in with, “Maybe she’s trying to cook up something that suits your personal preferences; you know, like Mrs. Hurley does.” Pattie Hurley was our local travel agent.

Mom glared down at me over her reading glasses like I was being a smart-ass. Then she said, “Don’t be a smart-ass, Charles,” which confirmed my ability to read her mind. Anyway, all I was trying to do was brighten things up before the teary goodbyes started in.

I guess my announcement that I wasn’t going to school did ring a bell with Mom after all, because she said to me, “It’s best to say your goodbyes now, because I simply cannot allow you to take another day off school. You have missed far too many since Faith came to live with us.”

Well, I could hardly argue that. So far this week I’d missed half of Monday and all day Tuesday, and now it was Friday. I really didn’t want to go, but since Mom and me had recently developed this great new relationship, I couldn’t bring myself to flat-out disobey her. Ever since Dad revealed the family secret about my mother being a genuine WW II hero who was awarded the George Cross along with the French *Croix de Guerre* and the American Medal of Freedom, my admiration for her had gone through the roof. And then, last Monday night, just as the Mount Peyton military invasion of Morocco was winding down, I’d watched my very own very proper English mother fire two 9mm slugs into the guts of Oberst Karl Hoffman, the same Gestapo official who tortured her in France and then sent her to the gallows. It might sound odd to you,

but knocking off Hoffman like she did really put the icing on our relationship. My mother was now someone I treasured above all else.

I glanced at my watch: ten to nine. School was only a five-minute walk, but I had to move fast to scrape in before the bell rang. I grabbed hold of Michael and hugged him as hard as I could, thinking it was alright for him because he had Susan, who was even closer to him than I was; natural enough, considering she was his wife. But still, Michael has been my absolute best friend ever since we started school and I don't mind telling you that his taking off like this really hurt.

What choice did I have when the tears began to fall?

"Your mother's not going to like this," I spluttered with my face jammed into his big shoulder. His parents, Jack and Laura, lived just up the road across from the school, but Jack was on the day shift, so he'd already gone to work. They knew all about the strange things that happened to Michael, but his little sister didn't. This was the reason Michael and Susan had to stay with us and sneak up to see them whenever she was in school, because if seven-year-old Liz ever learned the truth, she'd probably freak out, and then everyone in town would know what was going on. Of course six members of our local RCMP detachment knew the whole story; but Dad, because he was Commanding Officer of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment Reserve Corps, had made use of the Official Secrets Act to swear everyone who had participated in the raid to secrecy, including me.

"Don't worry," Michael said. "We'll scoot up there soon as the kids are all in school."

I knew it had to be this way. Michael and Susan couldn't be seen by any of our schoolmates because there was always a chance someone might recognize one of them, which was sure to give rise to some awkward questions being asked—no doubt the very reason Saint Sophia was sending them away. Or so I thought.

Pulling back, I said, "I just don't understand why you have to leave right now. I mean, why can't it be next week, or even tomorrow? You get a miserable one-hour warning? That sure sounds stinky to me."

Michael nodded and ruffled my bristly hair some more. "I don't know, Charlie. Maybe we're supposed to catch a train or something."

This prompted Susan to whip up one of her bubbly smiles. "Based upon the last few times Sophia looked after our travel arrangements, I don't see us boarding any train."

Anyway, I stiffened my back and made my teary goodbye as best I could, then hoofed it out to the front porch, pulled on my gaiters, grabbed my duffle coat and book bag and took off up the street. Sure enough, just as I was getting ready to turn into the school grounds, Mrs. Hanlon appeared on her veranda across from the school and called out, “You’re going to be late!”

She was smiling when she said this, no doubt because she was getting all primed up for another visit with Michael and Susan, just like the two previous mornings. I expect she was finally getting used to having a grown-up son and a daughter-in-law. Took a lot of effort on Faith’s part to convince her and Jack that this was all for the best and everything would be fine in the end. But now, as I waved back to her, I knew darn well the next time I saw her she was going to be heart-broken.

I slammed the school door shut behind me, wondering why life had to be so complicated.

Then two things happened at once: the school bell went off—meaning we were all supposed to be seated at our desks; and guess who happened to be on the lookout for latecomers that Friday morning? Yeah, you’re right: the Enforcer herself: Sister John Vincent, alias Old Frozen Face.

Now, the last time we had this sort of confrontation there was big trouble between us. Not only did Old Frozen Face prevent me from using the convent telephone, but then went ahead and whacked me across the kisser to make sure I was getting the message. Since Michael’s life was on the line, I’d had no choice but to pull out my German Luger and jam it into her fat beak. Then I ordered her to sit down and shut up until I finished making my call.

Sooner or later, I knew, she would have her revenge. With the demon Maloch having just been driven out of town with his tail between his legs, and no other enemy in sight, Faith had told me in the letter she wrote before taking off there was no more need for me to carry around a gun. So at the moment I had no recourse if this six-foot monster decided to rip off my head, which you can be sure would have delighted her to no end.

Blocking my way into the grade eight classroom, she said in that hissy voice of hers, “What do have we here? Another imbecilic urchin arriving late for school. Whatever should be done about that?”

I didn’t know what imbecilic meant, but I doubt if it was anything good. Thinking fast, I drummed up a sober expression and said, “Just had to attend to another emergency, Sister. You know, like what happened Monday afternoon. You remember that one, don’t you?”

I patted the side of my book bag, hoping this would serve as a strong hint that my Luger and me were still on friendly terms.

I watched those cold eyes shrivel into black dots as she tried to determine if I was simply trying to bullshit my way past her. The angelic looks God had blessed me with usually worked on our other grim-faced teachers, which had allowed me to wiggle out of trouble more than once over the years, but I was never able to fool the Enforcer. Sgt. Pearson told me she'd called him up to complain about our little gun episode, but I guess she was kinda shocked to learn he was the one who advised me to start packing one of Dad's handguns. The reason he gave her was clear enough: my two closest friends had just been murdered and he was inclined to believe I was next in line.

Anyway, my bluff worked, because she slowly moved that shroud of black material she had draped over her far enough to one side to allow me to get at the door handle. Then she leaned over and whispered, "This is not the end, young man. Not by a long shot."

Yeah, well, nothing new there. Sister Beatrice had already started in calling the roll but stopped when I came through the door. She went tsk, tsk, tsk, before saying, "Charles, other than young Elizabeth Hanlon, no one in this town lives closer to St. Paul's than you do. There is absolutely no reason for you to be late."

A couple of snarky responses popped into my head, but I didn't particularly want to make her mad at me. I marched over to my desk without comment. Sister Beatrice was one of our nicer teachers and usually didn't give me a hard time unless I deserved it. Anyway, after a few seconds glaring at me like I was some kind of criminal, she continued calling out the names, as if she didn't trust her eyes to tell her who was present and who wasn't. Bit weird, I always thought. After plunking my chubby ass down, I glanced around the room. It seemed to me everyone was a bit gloomy, which I figured was because they were still missing Faith just like I was. Well, maybe not as much as I was, because I was pretty sure I'd fallen in love with her, even if she's only twelve and I'm just two years older.

I don't mind telling you Faith Romanga was definitely the most beautiful and nicest person—if you can call a dead saint a person—who ever wandered into Mount Peyton. After taking Tuesday off to help Faith and Hope break the news to Michael's parents that their son had just returned, but he was a lot different from when he left—ten years older, in fact; to everyone's

surprise and disappointment I showed up in class Wednesday morning without Faith. I told them she'd gone back home to Toronto because her mother was sick.

Big lie, of course.

But I did know where she and Hope were headed—to the Soviet Union!

This is what Faith and her mother and sisters did in their spare time when they weren't sitting around heaven playing on their harps, or whatever it was they did up there. Something to do with the Communion of Saints, as Faith explained it to me, which is made up of the holy souls in purgatory, the faithful on earth, and the blessed in heaven. It was the responsibility of the ones who already made it home free to look after those of us still struggling down here on earth. The idea was to keep us from falling into the clutches of evil, which, I can tell you from personal experience, is no joke. According to Faith, Lucifer and his cohorts had set their sights on Russia as the key to their next big plan for world domination. Since they happened to own Comrade Stalin outright, he was pretty well dancing to whatever tune they wanted to play, including wiping out the few remnants of Christianity still hanging on by their fingernails. And while he was at it, he would continue knocking off his own people by the millions, which is exactly what he was up to before Herr Hitler had a sudden yen to see if he couldn't succeed where Napoleon failed. The way Faith explained it to me, WW II was only a temporary shutdown of Stalin's well-oiled annihilation machinery.

In any case, once the problems in Mount Peyton had been resolved, Faith moved on to join her family and the other saints who were working hard to keep the world from falling under the spell of communism. Faith told me they were only allowed to become involved when demonic manipulation was clearly underway; which is to say that as far as human intent was concerned, their hands were tied. This was proving to be a daunting task, according to her mother, Saint Sophia, as demonic presence was widespread over in that part of the world. She also told us Africa wasn't far behind.

“Charles Goodyear.”

Oops!

By not paying attention to what was going on in class, I'd completely missed the fact that we were no longer discussing catechism but had already moved into history—the trials and tribulations of Julius Caesar, as it turned out.

I gave Sister one of my squinty-eyed looks intended to let her believe I was paying attention. “Yes, Sister?”

“Brutus was said to be a stoic. What does stoic mean?”

Rats! I had no clue what she was talking about. I was scrambling around for an answer when Lucinda Reid, seated to my right, held up a piece of paper with the words *shows no emotion* written on it.

I creased my eyebrows into a deep furrow and said, “I believe it’s someone who shows no emotion.”

Sister Beatrice nodded once and said, “Correct,” then went on to ask Patsy Riley something about Portia, whoever Portia was.

When I gave Lucinda a little nod of thanks, she ran her tongue over her lower lip and gave me a sexy smile, which prompted my mind to start edging into confession territory. She was nowhere as cute as Donna Lane, my recently deceased girlfriend, compliments of Maloch the demon; and she couldn’t begin to compare to Faith’s beauty, which was even beyond any female you might come across in the movies. But still. Here I was without any close friends to speak of; I mean, in one sense most everyone in our class was on friendly terms. But there just wasn’t a single person I could think of in this whole town that I wanted to be best friends with.

That’s when it occurred to me that maybe, just maybe, with some friendly help from Lucinda Reid, I just *might* be able to recover from Faith and Michael deserting me like they did.

CHAPTER TWO

Mount Peyton and beyond

This is what happened after we left Charlie's house.

On our way up the hill to break the news to Mom, we hustled across Church Road to get as far away from the school as we could. A sharp wind was blowing in from the northeast, and it was cold. After spending a full year in the drenching humidity of West Africa, even our bones felt chilled. But the sky was mostly blue with no sign of snow. Susan had the hood of her duffle coat pulled up to keep her hair hidden from view just in case one of the nuns happened to be looking in our direction. Our Presentation Order teachers were the only people around likely to recognize Susan's remarkable hair, because they were the only ones to ever see her without her habit. Until that fateful night she stayed over at our house, that is. This might sound strange to you, but it was the color of Susan's hair that was responsible for all the trouble that found us down in Cameroon. A witch doctor named Yondi the Mighty, following orders from Down Below, suddenly announced that Susan Hanlon was the bride of Satan. Then Yondi and his herd of rampaging Bantu warriors attempted to send her off to join the devil by tossing Susan into a big bonfire—and me along with her.

We no sooner made it to our front gate when the RCMP's '47 Town and Country pulled in beside us. The driver was Inspector Léger, our recently appointed regional commanding officer—the very man who just three days ago was in charge of the top-secret Hanlon rescue mission. Keeping his rubber hand—a little memento from a commando raid into Kesselring's HQ during the war—fixed on the steering wheel, he stretched across to the passenger side to roll down the window. “Morning, you two. Better get in. We don't have much time.”

The new police boss was a tall, sturdy fellow with dark eyes, a classic de Gaulle nose, fuzzy black eyebrows, and a huge black moustache. I noticed the first time I met him the laugh crinkles around his eyes. His three banks of war citations, especially his George Cross, certainly impressed Charlie. Me too.

Susan gave me a questioning look before bending forward to place both hands on top of the wood-paneled doorframe. “I take it Saint Sophia has pulled you into her scheme to ferret us off to some faraway place.”

He smiled up at Susan. “Based on all the trouble we went through to bring you home, I sincerely hope not.”

“Where are you taking us?”

“To the train station.”

This came as a bit of a shocker. Especially since we were just joking about leaving by train instead of our usual method of travel: Sophia Airways. “Schedule been changed?” I asked. “Trains used to come through in the evening.”

He nodded. “Still do, but I understand this is one of those miniature units used by senior railway executives or government officials. A telegram just came in stating it has been assigned for your personal use.”

I wondered how that might have happened, but Susan beat me to the punch. “Telegram from where?”

Inspector Léger said, “The big boys in Ottawa. National HQ.”

Strange, I thought. “We have to say goodbye to Mom.”

He scrunched up his face. “I don't know if they're on a tight schedule or not, but I was told it will depart at nine-thirty. That gives me fifteen minutes to get you there.”

I nodded. “We'll make it quick.”

Grabbing Susan by the hand, we rushed up the veranda steps and almost crashed into Mom standing in the porch. Buster was right there at her feet and reached up to place his paws on my knees. It had taken a couple of visits before our big black and white cat was willing to believe I was the same Michael Hanlon who vanished from sight this time last year. Buster had seen Maloch come into my bedroom where Sister Catherine ended up spending the night because she didn't want to go back to the convent. Some scary things were going on over there at the time. I'd set up my camp cot right outside the bedroom to make sure no more Albanian gangsters stopped by to kidnap her, at least not without going through me and my German Luger. I later found out demons don't usually go through doors. They simply materialized and then de-materialized whenever they wanted to. So Maloch managed to sneak into my bedroom anyway.

Thankfully, Saint Sophia had been keeping watch over both of us and was able to squash Maloch's determined efforts with no problem at all. Then she whisked us off to the Vatican because this is where Susan was badly needed to deal with a serious problem they had going on over there at the time.

Oh, and that last part took place in Susan's era, not mine. In the year 2011.

My lovely mother was all dressed up in a nice cream-colored dress with big lilac flowers. Her cheery smile I remembered so well made her look more like Betty Grable than you could ever imagine. She and Dad had finally come to terms with the fact that they had a grown-up son and a gorgeous daughter-in-law. I knew she hadn't broke the news to Liz yet or to my Aunt Marg either, because that would have made for some tricky explaining and the whole town was sure to find out what was going on. God only knows where that could lead to.

I guess she could tell by my drooping shoulders something was wrong, so I confirmed it by saying, "Faith's mother just showed up and told us we have to take off right away. Sorry."

She looked up at me and then glanced at Susan standing behind me. "But you've only been home three days. Why must you leave so soon?"

"No idea," I told her, although I was pretty sure it had to do with the fact that we weren't supposed be here at all. Our Church-sponsored ten year work program down in Cameroon had been interrupted by some nasty black guys wanting to roast us alive, which resulted in the heavenly cavalry having to pop down to save our butts, but only on a temporary basis. In fact, that was just the beginning of our running nightmare, one that ended up in Prince Azhar's personal fiefdom in Casablanca where his Gestapo henchmen came within seconds of whacking

off the African branch of the Hanlon family tree. Thanks to Saint Sophia and two of her three daughters, this is when Inspector Léger, Colonel Goodyear and five more heavily armed RCMP officers appeared on the scene and managed to get the upper hand before it was too late. Charlie and his mother were there too, which darn near blew my mind.

“This isn’t fair,” Mom was saying as she backed up to let us in.

“Charlie agrees with you,” Susan told her.

“We can’t stay,” I explained. “Inspector Léger is supposed to have us at the train station in fifteen minutes.”

She said, “But the train doesn’t come in until six this evening.”

Susan said, “It’s one of those little government jobs. Seems we’re going to borrow it.”

“But whatever for?”

I took Mom into my arms and said, “We don’t know what’s going on. But at least this time we get to say goodbye. That’s progress, isn’t it?”

“Oh Michael,” she moaned into my shoulder as the first tears began to leak out. Susan stepped forward and wrapped her arms around both of us. I could feel the shudder going through her too, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she was recalling the reason why this was happening to us. If Mount Peyton hadn’t been selected to keep Susan Hanlon alias Sister Catherine alias Susan Bartlett hidden away from prying demonic eyes, I would have remained just a regular thirteen-year-old kid sitting over there in school right now wondering how many rabbits I’d caught in my slips or if I was having any luck with my beaver traps.

Back in the Town and Country’s front seat with Susan perched between us, I said, “I hate goodbyes.” Then I called out to Mom, standing tearfully by the garden gate, “Tell Dad I’m sorry we couldn’t hang around to say goodbye.”

She suddenly bolted forward and passed me something through the open car window. When I held up my hand, she let her mother-of-pearl rosary beads fall into it. “Take those with you,” she said as she backed away from the car. “I’ll use yours until you get back.”

I thanked her, thinking *if I get back*. I pocketed the beads as the Town and Country got underway. But the sight and feel of Mom’s rosary brought something else to mind: namely, that Susan and me were once again heading off into unknown territory. Based on our last two-week scramble, for all I knew something bad could be waiting for us soon as we left town.

“Hold up a minute!”

Inspector Léger pulled over at once, right in front of the Knights of Columbus hall. I said, “I’d feel a lot better if I had a gun. I should go back and grab my .32.” I gave him a hopeful smile and added, “Unless of course, you’d consider lending me your .38, and you could stop by later and grab my .32 until we get back. Dad knows where I keep the bullets.”

My .32 Smith & Wesson was still in my bedroom drawer but the .38 had a lot more wallop. Sure, I had the pearl-handled switchblade Sgt. Pearson had delivered to Dad after the trial of our two Albanian kidnapers was over, because I had asked him for it. But I didn’t see the knife as much of a defense.

He took about thirty seconds to kick it around, and then said, “I can let you have the Colt but not the holster. Might look odd, my returning to the stationhouse without it.”

After just wandering across Africa with a revolver tucked in my belt, I didn’t see lack of a proper holster as much of a problem. My expression turned into a grin as I said, “Deal.”

Once we were underway again, Susan said, “Michael, you do realize we are about to leave town wearing borrowed clothing.”

Most everything I had on belonged to Charlie’s father, from his laced-up leather boots to his red-checkered hunting cap. And while I suspected the fancy blue duffle coat Susan was wearing was expensive, the heavy moose-hide one I had on was likely stitched together by old Harry Horwood across the street. I’d seen two more like it hanging up in the back porch where Colonel Goodyear kept his hunting gear. I didn’t think he would mind my borrowing this one.

I said, “We can always ship it back once we get to wherever we’re going.”

Susan twisted in the seat to give me a funny look, then said, “And, in case you haven’t noticed, we have no spare clothing, no toiletries, and no money to purchase any.”

Yeah, that had a familiar ring to it. I placed my arm around her shoulders and said, “This is Saint Sophia’s show. I imagine she’s got all those logistical matters under control.”

When we arrived at the railway station ten minutes later, a fair herd of mostly older people had gathered around a dark blue single-car train with the Canadian coat of arms painted on the side. It looked to be around seventy feet long with a small engine chugging away at the front while the rear portion had six windows. I never knew they made trains this small.

Turning to Inspector Léger, I asked, “What kind of engine is it using?” I could tell it wasn’t a typical steam engine like those big locomotives that towed our regular trains.

“Diesel,” he replied. “Common enough up on the mainland these days.”

Susan said, "I wonder why the government of Canada has taken a sudden interest in our welfare?"

Neither Inspector Léger nor I could answer that question, so I reached across and accepted the Mountie's big Colt .38 and tucked it into my waistband while Susan looked on. Then I pocketed the extra twenty rounds he retrieved from a leather pouch attached to his Sam Browne waist belt. I thanked him and scanned the crowd for familiar faces, and sure enough, spotted several right off the bat. One stout fellow packing his lunch pail was Sammy Powell, just off the midnight shift I expect and had stopped in to see what all the fuss was about. The last time I saw him was the day I turned twelve, the same day Mrs. Quigley's coffin fell out of the hearse right in front of our house while I was perched on our front steps trying out the new harmonica Uncle Ray gave me. It was also the day old Paddy Ryan was killed by the demon, the first of the terrible Mount Peyton murders that took place this time last year.

Susan said, "I believe that man is trying to get our attention."

I glanced over to where she was pointing and saw a tall skinny guy up on the platform all decked out in a formal black uniform that made me feel a touch uncomfortable because it reminded me of that Gestapo colonel we'd just encountered down in Africa. He was waving impatiently at us.

I opened the door and said, "Appreciate the ride."

Inspector Léger reached across Susan and placed three ten dollar bills in my left hand—Canadian ones, I noticed. This was good, because I didn't think Newfoundland money would work up on the mainland, if that's where we were going.

I started to protest, but he waved me off and said in a serious voice, "Now for God's sake, you two, please stay out of trouble."

Susan thanked him for the money and turned to give him a little peck on the cheek. "We'll do our best, but I have to admit trouble does tend to follow us around, which of course is why this handsome young man married me. I believe he enjoys all this intrigue."

I didn't say anything, because in one sense she was dead right. I sure have led an exciting life since that evening I caught Sister Catherine playing the piano in the school—something she had been warned by her church mediary friend not to do under any circumstances. I took Susan's hand and helped her out of the Town and Country, then scrambled up the three steps leading from the parking lot level to the railway platform.

By now the locals who had come by to see the baby train realized its sole purpose in stopping at Mount Peyton was to pick up a couple of passengers. And perfect strangers at that, as we hopefully appeared to them. It was a wonder the *Advertiser's* lone reporter, Hamish Blackmore, hadn't yet put in an appearance, but I knew he would be here before long. I pulled Colonel Goodyear's cap down over my ears and kept my head down as we hurried along to where the conductor, if that's what he was, waited patiently beside a set of lowered metal steps. He didn't say a word, but the second we were both onboard, the steps folded behind us and he blew his whistle.

At least a hundred people had crowded onto that platform; lord knows where they all came from this time of the morning, but when the engineer switched his diesel engine into forward gear and the wheels began to turn over, they began waving at us. Just being friendly, I guess. Even inspector Léger waved at us, though I noticed he had a pretty somber look that made me wonder if he knew more than he was letting on. We dropped down into one of the soft leather double seats and waved back. Safe inside our own personal train, I realized we no longer needed to be concerned if anyone recognized us. Even if some discerning eye happened to draw a bead, proof needed to back up their suspicions was just pulling out of the station. Then I saw Hamish Blackmore's 1946 Plymouth pulling in, and wondered what Inspector Léger was going to tell him.

So, just like that we were off, headed west, since we were pointed in that direction. Of course it was always possible for the engineer to make use of the roundabout a mile down the track to swing us back on an easterly bearing. Five minutes out of town we sailed by Hennessey's Marsh where Charlie and me used to hunt Wilson's snipe. Because of their unpredictable flight, Dad figured once I learned to knock snipe out of the air with my .410 Remington, it wouldn't ever be a problem taking down any kind of bird, no matter what the conditions. He was right about that, which made me feel sad about leaving him behind without saying goodbye. But St. Sophia was calling the shots, so it's not like I had a choice.

This made me think about what Charlie must be going through. Having him sob away on my shoulder just about brought me to tears. It was tough having to say goodbye to my best friend, who was really the brother I never had. The few days we had together were pure gold, and I loved every minute of it.

Susan popped up and began wandering about the car, saying over her shoulder, “I wonder what kind of bizarre adventure awaits us this time? Nothing like what happened to us in Casablanca, I most sincerely hope.”

I didn’t say anything, but her question caused me to wonder if my professional qualifications were still applicable. When St. Sophia arranged our transfer from Rome down into the wilds of Cameroon, I became an overnight professor of biology and Susan was appointed my secretary. We had supposedly gone down there on behalf of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington to study certain aspects of wildlife behavior. That was my formal learning, which was somehow instilled inside my head in the same miraculous manner St. Sophia did everything else. But in fact my real education back in Mount Peyton only took me as far as grade six before Sister Catherine entered my life and everything went chaotic, including our falling in love. Our ten-year age difference was a tough one for Sophia to deal with, but I have to tell you she came up with a great solution.

After a few minutes Susan came back and rendered her opinion: “Pretty swanky, I must say.”

“Yup,” I agreed. Our compartment contained six sets of double seats that faced each other, three on each side. The paneled walls were made of lacquered hardwood with fancy polished brass handles and lamps and other ornamental gadgets protruding here and there. It was no more than thirty feet long. Since we were at the rear, I assumed there had to be another compartment right behind the engine, probably for sleeping or dining, or I suppose the railway staff could hang out there. Since they weren’t in here with us, they had to be somewhere. I noticed someone had recently been smoking cigars, which helped offset the stink of diesel fumes leaking through the closed windows. The muted clickity-click of steel wheels on steel rails was pleasant enough, and I noticed a narrow six-foot-high bookcase near the front crammed full of hardcover books that were sure to help pass the time until we got to wherever we were going.

Thinking about this, I looked over at Susan, still checking out the brass works. “The Newfoundland Railway is narrow gauge, so I don’t see this car going aboard the ferry at Port aux Basques because it won’t be able to run on the mainland tracks.”

She came by, bent over with a mischievous grin and nose-to-nose, said, “Is that a fact?”

Oops. I knew where that look usually took us, but since we weren't alone I thought it best not to encourage her. Which was just as well, because two minutes later the forward door popped open.

I expected to see the skinny guy in the black uniform, our conductor, come in to offer us tea, or maybe whisky if this really was a government train. My dad was convinced big-time government guys spent a lot of their time drinking whisky.

But no, it sure wasn't our conductor. It was a stranger. He nodded to Susan as he strolled over and sat in the double seat across from me.

The stranger was about average height, but stocky, like he was accustomed to hard work. Rough-looking hands more or less confirmed this. Not young, maybe early fifties, and didn't look to me like he was from anywhere around here. He was dressed up in a weathered tan leather jacket, heavy twill pants with a dark green woolen shirt, laced-up boots, and a quiff hat like Humphrey Bogart wore in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*. While his skin color pretty well matched his jacket, his eyes were so dark I couldn't make out their color. His hair was black, longer than men usually wore, and I noticed his mouth was raised slightly on the right side, which gave him the appearance of being caught in a state of constantly trying to grin but not quite making it. An odd bird for sure.

"Who might you be?" Susan asked after she returned to her seat.

After crossing his legs to make himself comfortable, our visitor produced a cigar and took his time lighting it up, which explained where that aroma inside our compartment came from. Finally, after a few hefty drags, he said, "My name's John Ritter. I already know your names."

His voice was kinda gruff, like he was suffering through a hangover. His jacket was wide open, so I didn't think he was carrying a gun unless he had it tucked behind in his belt. Still, I was glad Inspector Léger had agreed to lend me his Colt.

"I guess you're with the government."

"Close enough," he agreed.

"Canadian, presumably?" Susan asked.

"Not exactly," Mr. Ritter told her.

Then he pointed back over his shoulder. "That skinny door over there beside the bookcase is a clothes closet. Why don't you go hang up those heavy coats and make yourselves comfortable?"

It was warm inside our little train, so that sounded like a good idea to me. I took off my red hunting cap, shimmied out of Colonel Goodyear's moose-hide jacket and then helped Susan with Mrs. Goodyear's blue duffle coat.

After I came back and sat down, Susan said, "I know of a John Ritter, a comedian." Then she gave me a puzzled look and said, "Oh dear. That's way into the future. He might not even be born yet."

Our Mr. Ritter must have found this amusing, because he let go a small chuckle before saying, "He's here okay. Arrived September seventh, nineteen forty-eight."

"Two years old," Susan said. "Think he's cracking jokes yet?"

"Bit early," Mr. Ritter replied.

I asked, "So where do you come from?"

Instead of answering, he pointed his cigar at the roof.

"That's it? You live on top of the train?"

Susan's elbow in the ribs told me I was being foolish, but if John Ritter was going to play games with us, I didn't see why I couldn't play games with him.

Okay, so maybe the guy just wanted to appear mysterious, like some character in an Alfred Hitchcock film. "We're in a railway car owned by the government of Canada. So if you don't work for them, who do you work for?"

He tilted his head to watch the pungent blue smoke spiral out of the end of his plump cigar. Several seconds went by before he ran his top teeth over his lower lip and twisted his face into a grimace. Then he spoke a single word:

"God."

CHAPTER THREE

Hell

Late in the earth year 2012, Vulgaat, one of three administrative demons with perpetual access to hell's new leader, arrived at the center of the Ninth anti-gravity platform where Multus usually held office. He was there to announce that Michael and Susan Hanlon were on the move.

“They have just now departed Mount Peyton, Master.”

At the moment Multus had his yellow reptilian eyes fixed upon a huge crystalline cube portraying a distant vision of the Pacific Ocean as it surged back and forth from one extremity to the other. Except for those demons fortunate enough to be sent to work on earth, this was as close to real water as Multus, or any other poor soul unfortunate enough to be condemned to hell's eternal fires, would ever come.

Slowly, Multus turned his massive horned skull, which happened to be glowing emerald green at the moment, toward the messenger. After a brief reflection upon what this news could mean, he said, “I wonder where they will go this time, and what they will get up to. Perhaps ... yes ... summon Prefect Himmler. I wish to hear what he has to say about these irritating mortals.”

Himmler was not only the former head of Hitler's notorious Gestapo corps but counted among his many accolades the role of founder and administrator of the Jewish extermination camps. He had only recently been appointed to the newly formed Satanic Governing Council. He replaced Prefect Maloch, lost forever in the depths of hell when he committed the unpardonable offense of breaking three of the major protocols that govern the relationship between the Upper and Lower Kingdoms.

Multus waited until the former Nazi bigwig had touched down and his leathery wings folded in place before launching into a detailed background of the Susan Bartlett affair, now known as the Hanlon affair, as the woman had since married a young whelp whose growth had been accelerated by the hated Saint Sophia, a constant thorn in hell's side. Sophia and her three repulsive offspring were now hard at work back in the 1950's era attempting to undo everything the recently disposed Prince Lucifer had worked so hard to achieve in Soviet Russia. Her successes were proving to be worrisome, even if the current level of world activity indicated, at least on the surface, that nothing of significance had changed. But over the years Multus had learned that the future could be, and often was, altered in order to match up with certain major events that would unfold differently from what had initially taken place. His principal task was to seize upon any and all opportunities that might come along that could, even remotely, improve their chances of gaining a real foothold upon earth, a goal that had constantly eluded his former master. Multus knew all too well nothing could be taken for granted, even time itself. Vigilance remained the order of the day.

The Hanlon affair was just one of several unsettled issues the chief demon had inherited by taking over the reins of Hades. He found it troubling that the best efforts of one of their senior officials had failed so miserably; and further, that these two insignificant mortals had been allowed to go unpunished.

While conducting the merry-go-round motion endemic of all demonic sessions, Prefect Himmler listened with interest to the appalling story of Susan Hanlon's circumstantial but powerful intervention in the recent course of human history. Her heavenly guided interference had effectively shut down radical Islam, thereby bringing to an ignominious end a glorious opportunity to secure earthly tenure for the denizens of hell's eternal furnace, a promise frequently made by the disposed Prince Lucifer and the primary reason for his acrimonious disposal.

Uncertain why he alone was being regaled with such lengthy discourse, Himmler inclined his horned skull and ventured to say, “A sad and troubling affair, my Lord Multus. You are naturally upset about how this matter unfolded, but surely it is too late now to reverse what has already passed into history.”

Multus did not care for the tone being used by this fledgling Prefect, so he switched to a more formal voice. “Whether or not it is too late depends upon how I wish to proceed. You were summoned to contribute your input, provided you have something worthwhile to contribute. Do you?”

Everyone immersed in hell’s fires knew of the terrible fate that had befallen Hadrian and Maloch because of their ongoing efforts to eliminate the Hanlons; so as much as he would welcome the opportunity to return to earth, Himmler had no intention of volunteering to be next in line to go after those two troublesome mortals.

“But Master, are they not still under heavenly protection?”

“Their status has not changed in any way.”

Acknowledging this, Himmler twisted his flipper hands into a knot, sucked in his gaunt cheeks and set about racking his demonically overhauled brain as best he could. But he soon came to realize that beyond sending more warriors into the fray, there appeared to be no other viable course of action capable of providing satisfactory results.

Aware of his master’s growing impatience, he ventured to say, “You might consider launching an indirect attack within the community where they wind up. A subtle blend of trickery and deceit among the locals should render a positive result.”

As usual, both demons were angled slightly inward toward the center of the thirty-meter diameter circle they were proscribing. Multus paused and turned to look Himmler directly in the eye. “Mere words. I need details.”

Then something most unusual occurred to Himmler. “Back in the year nineteen fifty this Michael Hanlon shot and killed Major Von Stoner in Khartoum. Three days later his friend’s mother executed Colonel Hoffman in Casablanca. Both were cold-blooded assassinations.”

Hell has no means of keeping track of the parade of lost souls who arrive every minute of every day, and little interest is shown to common sinners who had just fallen into the deep abyss, unless of course they had done something useful while on earth to warrant special attention. It

was the appearance of renowned purveyors of death like Pol Pot and Edi Amin that Multus and Lucifer before him relished above all else.

“Continue.”

“As it turns out, these two officials were senior members of my Gestapo corps. Men whose hands were covered in blood.”

His casual reference to blood piqued his leader’s interest, as Himmler knew it would. “Star performers, you say?”

The subservient demon inclined his gnarly skull. “Indeed they were.”

Because these particular deaths had taken place many years earlier, Multus was not familiar with their backgrounds, even though they had once been members of an elite execution corps. “You are suggesting I make use of Hoffman and Von Stoner?”

“I am inclined to believe, O Great One, that they would welcome the opportunity to extract vengeance.”

Multus nodded. He liked what he was hearing, though such a decision—to promote two subordinate inmates of hell’s fiery prison to the rank of earth demon—was sure to draw criticism from other members of the governing council.

“Very well. You may inform Vulgaat that I have authorized issuing their wings.”

“Ahhh ...”

Once again Multus stopped his pacing about and asked, “Was there something else?”

“These deplorable saints, Master, the ones making it difficult for your glorious forces to gain a proper foothold on earth. They have no need of wings to move about. I’ve noticed during these recent years that they sometimes appear as ordinary mortals, even to the point of brazenly maintaining their original identity. Can our emissaries not also materialize and conduct themselves in a similar manner?”

The question caught Multus off guard. His extensive knowledge of the how the universe was unfolding, particularly when it came to the human species, instinctively warned him such intrusive meddling would never be permitted. Hell’s upstart leader knew all too well that the establishment of the Lower Kingdom was a direct result of God’s momentous decision to try something different with His latest Creation. He would bestow the Spark of Eternal Life upon a certain primitive human clan wandering through the wilderness simply by stating, *I will take you to myself for my people, and I will be your God*. And that was it. A whole new race of god-like

creatures came into being in the blink of an eye. The chosen race was to be given a certain sacred essence later to become known as a soul that would become part and parcel of who they were forever more. When it dawned upon the mighty Prince of Light that he was not going to be offered this God-spark, he became infuriated. Lucifer's celebrated reaction was outright revolt, followed by banishment into the Great Fiery Abyss created for the express purpose of containing his satanic presence and those rebel angels foolish enough to remain faithful to him.

But Lucifer was still the most powerful creature to ever come into existence, currently tucked away for all eternity, immobile within the confines of a gravity force field many times greater than the mightiest neutron star.

Bearing in mind that he did not possess Prince Lucifer's enormous depth of knowledge when it came to earthly matters, Multus went on to say, "Naturally, we have free rein to take control of animals and even mortal flesh when it is expedient to do so, but what you are suggesting is certain to be considered provocative."

The Big Boss pondered this for a moment before adding, "I have to admit that the notion has considerable merit, but I am unable to envision your esteemed colleagues being allowed to show up as their former selves."

Warming to the idea of seeing deceased members of his famous Gestapo once again walk upon the earth, Himmler pressed forward. "Let's say you did send them back. What is the probable outcome if the Upper Kingdom were to rule that your actions convened one of their idiotic protocols? What could they do?"

Multus did not appreciate the casual manner in which he was being addressed, almost as if they were equals. "Those two would be banished forever, perhaps even condemned to suffer the same extreme punishment meted out to Hadrian and Maloch."

"That's it? They'd not do anything to you or me?"

Multus gave his fiery green horns a good toss and declared, "We have no authority in the Upper Kingdom. They have no authority in the Lower Kingdom. It has been like this since the beginning of time."

"Well then," Himmler said with a cold-eyed grin, "If, as you say, our downside is negligible, my advice is to send Hoffman and Von Stoner back to earth at once."

Realizing they were breaking new ground with this sort of unorthodox approach, Multus took some time before he responded. "And if they fail, so what? This is what you're telling me?"

“Exactly, Master.”

“And their mission?”

“The usual. Chaos, of course; but more, I should think, in the case of the Hanlons and those close to them, especially the Goodyear family. I know Michael and Susan Hanlon fall under this annoying bitch’s personal seal of protection, but there has to be other ways to get to them. If not death, then perhaps their lives can be made so miserable they may not even wish to live.”

Multus gave a solemn nod. “An admirable goal, surely. But such an agenda will need to be tightly coordinated, because sooner or later those sanctimonious wretches are bound to try and terminate the enterprise, perhaps with severe repercussions. Are you prepared to take on this responsibility?”

Himmler inclined his moderately-sized goat’s horns and declared, “It would be a great honor, Master. As for our primary targets, in the case of the Hanlons I suggest waiting to see where they end up before taking action. But I see no reason why we cannot get started on Mount Peyton at once.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Mount Peyton

When the twelve o'clock mill whistle went off, Sister Beatrice closed her geography book and told us it was time to go home for dinner, as if we didn't already know. I turned to Lucinda Reid and said, "That was great, what you did this morning." This was to thank her for helping me with the history question.

Lucinda stood up and slowly ran her hands down over slim hips to smooth out the wrinkles in her dreary blue school uniform. She adjusted her black-framed cat-eye glasses and leaned toward me wearing a flirty smile. "Now that your cousin's gone home, maybe I can be your new best friend."

Backing away in shock, I said, "You're a pretty brave girl. You know what happened to my last two best friends."

Lucinda batted her long lashes a few times before saying, "That was terrible, okay, what happened to Donna and Jerry, but nothing is going to happen to me."

I remembered Michael used to like Lucinda a lot before he went ahead and married Sister Catherine, so I kinda looked at the offer like maybe I was carrying on from where Michael left off. I mean, I couldn't see him ever wanting to be best friends with Lucinda again.

"Deal," I said, taking in Lucinda's adult-size frontage she was pushing up with both hands to make sure I realized what was being offered. Boy, I was having a hard time keeping my mind from flying off in a certain direction I'm sure Father O'Reilly would find interesting. Though not near as interesting as my last trip to the confessional when I had to bail out without receiving absolution because he refused to believe what I told him about my overnight visit to Africa.

"Taylor's barn, around four-thirty. If you're interested."

I gulped a couple of times before saying, "Don't worry, I'll be there."

Once out on the narrow strip of gravel that separated our school from the church, I decided to wait for Michael's little sister Liz. I could just imagine how upset her mother was once Michael told her he had to leave town again. When Donny Alyward emerged from the mad scramble of noisy kids buttoning up their coats, I told him I was going over to Hanlon's for dinner. Since Michael's departure, Donny and me often walked home together at noon; at least we did before Faith arrived on the scene.

He shrugged. "No problem. Too bad your cousin had to take off. She was a real charmer."

"Yeah, you got that right."

I guess seeing me standing there must have told Liz I was waiting for her, so she quietly came along and took my hand like it was the most natural thing in the world. I suppose in a way it was, because I had more or less taken over Michael's role since he vanished last year; and even though he was back, he wasn't *really* back, at least not as far as Liz was concerned.

We took off running across Church Road while keeping an eye on the traffic. The workers on regular day shift would be along any minute on their way home for some grub and maybe a quick nap before racing back again. Lots of men lived a good distance away, so they had to hustle to get home, eat, nap, and then get back in time to punch the time clock before the one o'clock whistle blew. Men who lived further away, unless they had some means of transportation, carried lunch baskets and ate in the lunchroom at the mill.

When Michael's mother heard me and Liz taking off our gaiters out in the front porch, she came out to meet us. Whatever she was cooking up in the kitchen smelled pretty darn good, I can

tell you. She was all dolled up in a nice flowery white dress but looked real sad to me, and no wonder.

She gave me a questioning look, like I was guilty of something. “You know, don’t you?” “Know what?” Liz asked, looking up at her mother.

When I gave her a silent nod, Mrs. Hanlon dropped her head and didn’t move for a full minute. I expect she was trying hard not to break into tears. Liz got tired of waiting for an answer and said, “I have to go to the bathroom.”

Once Liz was out of sight, Mrs. Hanlon grabbed hold of me without saying another word. We were still standing there in dead silence with Buster squeezed between our feet when Mr. Hanlon marched up the front steps.

He didn’t have to be a detective to know something funny was going on, so after removing his gaiters, he strolled in and asked, “What’s up?”

Mrs. Hanlon was just about to let him know the sad truth when Liz wandered back into the front room. Since Liz still had no idea her brother had arrived home in the first place, Mrs. Hanlon had no choice but to clam up until she got her husband alone. An awkward situation for sure but a necessary one.

Anyway, Liz didn’t seem to notice anything was wrong and headed straight for the piano where she began playing *Blue Moon*, which I have to say didn’t sound too bad for a little kid. I threw my duffle coat on the chesterfield and followed her parents into the kitchen where I took my usual chair at the far end of the table. This is where Michael used to sit when he was home. Buster flopped down across my right foot, something he started doing just last month.

After washing his hands over in the sink, Mr. Hanlon took his seat at the head of the table and looked across at me with his eyebrows squished together. “Haven’t laid eyes on you since you and those two pretty little girls popped in Tuesday morning. Is everything alright?”

“Not really,” I told him, and I was getting ready to throw in the kicker when Mrs. Hanlon turned away from the stove and said in a kinda panicky voice, “Charlie, it’s best you leave the telling to me, okay?”