

HARVENGER

~ The Angel of Death ~



ALBERT DAVID SUTTON

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious
and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead,
is purely coincidental.

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For my mother, father
and sister.

har.ven.ger *n*, **1.** that which is followed by, or heralds death.
2. a person, object or thing that brings death.

PROLOGUE

The little carriage lay smashed and splintered at the bottom of a deep escarpment, its journey down the embankment marked by broken pieces that had been torn away as it tumbled end over end. A small section of the track had given way as the horse and cart travelled over it, the burden of weight too great on the fatigued slab that had already begun to pull itself away in a great semi-circular crack. Undermined by erosion and crumbling soil it had finally succumbed.

With the ground slipping away from underneath them the couple had little if no time to react. The horse held its ground for a mere second while the cart slid below it and then inexorably dragged them all down. As the drop steepened everything began to tumble — a river of soil, wood and life careening down the hillside. It lasted only moments, and as everything finally came to rest and the dust slowly settled, nothing moved.

Hours passed, the sun drifted further west and shadows began to lengthen. Then silently, in this serene landscape of rolling hills a lone figure came running along the track. Momentarily she slowed and stopped at the place where the ground had fallen away. Then risking life and limb she began

the descent — this time by choice.

The young woman, no more than a girl, half ran half fell down the slope. Sliding on the loose top layer of soil and riding it to the bottom, she passed the horse, twisted in its reins like some fish in a net, its legs tucked under it, its neck broken. A short distance below lay the remains of the carriage and under this the crushed body of a man, her father. Dead at a glance, his lifeless form was pinned at the chest under a mountain of weight.

Downwards she flew, to a small crumpled form at the very base of the escarpment. A thin red line trickled from the nose of the woman's up-turned face. At the sudden touch of the girl the woman's eyes fluttered open before closing again softly and a small moan escaped with her feeble breath. The girl's tears fell on her mother's face like the first drops of rain. Helplessly she tried to comfort her mother. Again the woman's eyes opened slightly, and she gazed up at the distraught face of her daughter. With all the strength she could muster she gave a little squeeze of her hand — a small gesture of love and affection that would be her last.

Above and behind her daughter she could see a shape — a large and looming black shape, as black as the night and so large that it blocked out the sky. She wondered how her daughter could not see it. But the girl was seeing her mother's stare, an intense look that went through and past her. Thinking that perhaps some form of help had

arrived the girl turned her head up over her shoulder. But there were only the floating clouds and shining sun to be seen.

Death arrived to find two women at his feet. The older woman was dying. Massive internal bleeding was taking her life force. Her pain had been great, but now her body was numb and all she felt was cold. Her eyes remained barely open but he saw that she was aware of him.

The other turned as if in response to her mother's vision, but she looked right through him, squinting through a torrent of tears into the sun. She was not much more than a girl, soon to be a young woman and for a brief strange moment Death felt captivated by her. It was not his usual predilection to stand and look at a girl, but for some reason this one held him transfixed, and somewhere in the muddy waters of his mortal remembrance a small ember flared — a tiny spark that should never have been ignited.

For a moment he was startled and wondered what to do. The girl was beautiful beyond all doubt and some day soon she would be an even more beautiful woman. But he had seen a world full of such beauty, dressed in rags or in riches, and none of them had ever touched him like this. Why should this poor orphaned peasant girl cause a heightening of his senses and a tightness in his belly? A little confused he reached out to touch her face. But

she turned back to her mother an instant before the embrace and his hand froze indecisively above her head. Instead he reached past and into the body of the dying woman, stripping from her the life force that had waited long enough to be taken.

Placing it within his robes he made to go, but once again he hesitated. The girl lay sobbing over the deceased body of her mother, and while he had no concern for the affairs of the mortal world, still the girl touched him, in a way he had never known, or remembered, or even thought himself capable of. Once again he went to touch her, to stroke her long soft hair, yet his hand remained always a fraction away from doing so. He was unable to bring himself to touch a girl who had just lost her family. It seemed to him that death had already touched her today, so he pulled back from physically doing so.

At last he turned away and, with the sharp edge of his scythe, he slit the fabric of the mortal world. It peeled back before his blade the way paper curls from fire, leaving before him a limitless void into which he stepped. No sooner had he passed through than the air shivered and he was gone, leaving behind a young woman in her grief. But he took the image of her face with him, indelibly etched upon his memory.

CHAPTER ONE

Belfry was essentially a religious town that had been founded over 50 years before by several families whose faith had led them into the wilderness and away from the city walls and civilisation. They had turned their backs on the unhealthy city environment to seek out a new life upon fresh untouched land, away from the heathenish world of others, away from disease and away from poverty. To them it had seemed a pilgrimage into uncharted territory, with no road to guide them and no sense of where they were going, only an unwavering faith in what their lord would provide, and for what they could provide for their children.

These first travellers did not remember how long they had searched or how far they had come, only that each new day brought them a little closer to their dream. Indeed eventually they did find that dream, in a gentle open valley nestled among the hills and woods of a virgin landscape. A sea of green waist-high grass extended to the clear softly flowing waters of a beckoning river. Here they could raise their families and practise their faith in a world of their own making.

But it was not just the picture perfect image the land possessed that bade them to settle here. Near

the head of the valley, the land rose sharply, like an ocean wave surging up against a hard rock escarpment of black granite that seemed to pull the soft earth up with it. The dark granite wall rose from the soil like a titan awakening — a cliff face that for them marked the end of a journey. And, teetering at the top, on the very edge of the steep rock face rose a singular tall black finger of rock, three times a man's height. To the newcomers it appeared like a church spire and so, with much celebration and prayer, they named the place Belfry and settled down under the rock's monolithic shadow.

The families soon grew and prospered and over time other folk following their trail came to join them and take up residence in the surrounding land. It was not long before Belfry became officially recognised by King and country and was recorded on maps and in documents.

But that was over a generation ago and times had changed. As more people came to settle in the town the founding families struggled to maintain the dream that they had sought and the foothold they held in the town's affairs. Such were the forces at work that none could have seen what would become of the small hamlet in only a single generation.

Now Belfry was a small thriving township of almost 1200 people. No longer were people drawn to it solely because of the wealth to be found in

its soil. The land did provide excellent pasture for grazing and its gentle terrain and broad catchment basin provided good conditions for many crops, but Belfry's popularity grew largely as a spill-over effect from the rapid expansion of two coastal cities that lay several weeks' ride to the north and to the south.

Lying, as it did, almost half way between such growing meccas of commerce, invariably meant that Belfry saw its fair share of travellers, merchants and businessmen. Sometimes these people were so taken by the beauty of the land and the awesome presence of the monolith that they failed to leave. It was of growing concern to some of the older established families that these people were undesirable. But progress, it seemed, was inevitable.

One industrious new family had planted out a sizeable part of their land in grapes with the aim of starting a winery. This had caused plenty of debate and heated argument amongst the residents. It was argued that the production of alcohol was not an attribute that Belfry should become known for. It would, the opponents said, likely lead to drunkenness and disorder by some of the town's population and would also attract the wrong sort of element to the town. However the vineyards had been planted and there was little any protestor could do against a wealthy merchant banker whose son aspired to be a vintner.

The main body of the town sprawled over a large area of the valley that lay directly beneath the Belfry rock. Its main thoroughfares bustled with horses, carts and wagons as people went about their business. Here were the lands occupied by the families that had first laid eyes upon the valley, some of which had been divided up and sold or leased to the newer immigrants. In general, the further away from the Belfry rock, the sparser the population became and the newer the faces.

At the upper reaches of the valley past the town and almost directly beneath the Belfry rock, stood a tall long narrow building of brilliant whitewashed stone. At its front, a bell tower rose above the town in effigy of the monolith, and perched on its crest a large white cross pierced the sky, seemingly able to float with the very clouds. The church and grounds were surrounded by an equally brilliant white stone fence laced with thorny rose bushes that, when in full bloom, some said, made the Holy Church of Belfry the prettiest church in the land.

It was Friday morning and the inside of the church was practically empty. Two rows of pews that were no more than long flat benches ran down either side of the room. Through the large open front door the early morning sun streamed in, casting a thick ray of light part way down the central aisle and towards the pulpit and alter. It was in front of the pulpit that the only people in the church were gathered — the Minister, a boy and his mother.

Father Murphy Dillins belonged to one of the founding families of Belfry and had succeeded his now deceased uncle as the town's chaplain. In his mid fifties, and large of build, he was the sort of man who looked as though he belonged more on a horse as a ranch hand than in a church as a priest. The lines around his eyes were deep and did not appear kind. His skin was tough and leathery and thick tufts of grey hair sprouted from his ears and nose, though his broad moustache and wiry beard hid them well.

His marriage to the eldest daughter of the family's closest friends had been decided for him at an early age. But the girl, though pretty, had always been sickly and feeble. She had also turned out to be barren. Nevertheless, the marriage survived until she died of a fever before her 30th birthday. To this day Father Murphy had not remarried.

He stood at the front pew alongside Mrs. Shirley Montgomery who had her son Jimmy with her. The boy stood fidgeting before the priest with his head bowed in shame.

"I just don't know what I'm going to do with him father," said Mrs. Montgomery looking down at her son. "Maybe you could put some sense into the lad. He just won't listen to me and if I go and tell his father the man just knocks the daylights out of him, and as much as he needs to be punished I just don't like to see that."

"Look up at me Jimmy," said Father Murphy,

laying both hands on the boy's shoulders. But Jimmy's head remained fixedly staring at his feet and instead he wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "I can see as you're embarrassed boy. Your face is as red as a beet so I guess you know in your heart that you've done wrong by your dear mother. Don't you?"

The little head nodded.

"I tell you what, Mrs. Montgomery. My rectory is in need of a good cleaning as my housekeeper is away for the week visiting relatives. How about we get your young Jim here to do his penance by washing down the dust that has laid itself over my furnishings? Perhaps doing a little of God's chores and giving the lad some responsibility will help cure him of his wickedness." The little body stiffened at that comment.

As Father Murphy spoke he caught sight, over the shoulder of Mrs. Montgomery, of another figure entering the church. Glancing over, he found himself suddenly confronted by a vision that was alluringly all too brief. For, framed momentarily in the brightly lit doorway through which the sun streamed, was the intoxicating bodily outline of Lauryl LeMont. For a brief moment her perfect young form was clearly visible, silhouetted through her long white cotton dress. The sun's rays pierced the material and surrounded her body in a halo of glowing white fabric. Then, as she passed into the shadowed comfort of the church, the effect

vanished, leaving only the memory of that one brief moment imprinted in the priest's mind.

“. . . Are you alright father?” Father Murphy heard Mrs. Montgomery asking. He realised that he had for a moment dissolved into a world of fantasy inhabited solely by Lauryl LeMont.

“Huh,” he stumbled. “Sorry, you were saying?”

Mrs. Montgomery turned and looked over her shoulder, a disapproving frown creasing her forehead as she saw the figure moving down the aisle toward them. It wasn't right she thought that a priest's attention should be distracted so wantonly. Lauryl passed by with a quick nod and good morning to all present and made her way over to a table of largely unlit candles.

“I was saying that it's perfectly fine by me if you want Jimmy to set to with cloth and mop. I have to go and try to put things right with Mrs. Dawson. I just hope that horse dung Jimmy threw is going to wash out of the poor woman's dress, otherwise I'm going to find it very hard to replace the garment without his father finding out.”

Father Murphy smiled and nodded, trying to regain his composure after seeing the disapproval that had crept into Mrs. Montgomery's manner over his obvious drooling over Lauryl.

“Okay then Shirley, you just leave the boy with me. I'll make sure that he's kept busy until you get back.”

The woman turned to her son. “Don't you go

giving the Father no trouble now,” she said waving a finger at him. “I think you’ve done enough mischief for one day.”

Then without another word she turned on her heels and bustled away from the pair. One set of sorrowful eyes watched his mother go while the other, cruel and malign, lingered longingly on the figure kneeling on the other side of the room. The priest finally felt the gaze of the young boy upon him and he looked down to meet his stare.

“She’s pretty,” the boy said, noticing the interest the priest had in the young woman.

“Yes she is . . . very,” he replied. “Well I suppose we had better get you to work then, hadn’t we?”

Pressing a hand firmly behind the boy’s back he gently guided him out to the rear living quarters of the church. There they fetched a pail and went out the back door to where a water trough was kept full by the rain.

“She pushed me, you know,” blurted Jimmy as Father Murphy bent down to fill the pail.

“Who pushed you Jimmy?”

“Mrs. Dawson . . . I was in the general store with Mum but she was at the counter getting served so I was just looking around at all the stuff and Mrs. Dawson just came along and pushed me out of the way, real hard like, saying I was a nuisance and shouldn’t be left to wander around. So I waited outside until she came out and that’s when I threw the horse dung at her.”

His little lungs had got that out all in one breath and now he stood with eyes imploring the priest for forgiveness. Father Murphy put down the pail and sat on the edge of the trough bringing his face down close to Jimmy's.

"I understand Jimmy, and where Mrs. Dawson is concerned I can believe she did exactly what you said." Here he paused looking into the young face before him and wondering how to handle this. "But sometimes you have to forgive people their sins and go on about your business. You can't go around covering people in horse muck every time they make you angry."

The boy's eyes went back to staring at the ground. "You can see the problem you've caused for your dear mother . . . and God will probably not intervene if your father should find out."

He could see that the boy was now close to tears so he said, "Never mind lad. What say we forget about the cleaning? I've got some toy soldiers in my study. How would you like to go in there and play with them?"

Immediately Jimmy's face brightened at this unexpected turn of events. "Yes please," he beamed.

"You have to promise me three things first though."

The boy was hesitant for only a second before he agreed. "Okay," he said.

"First," began Father Murphy, "You have to

promise to be careful and look after them as they're not easy to come by."

The little head nodded. "Second, you can't tell your mother that your punishment was no punishment at all. It wouldn't do well for you or me if she knew I let you off so lightly. The little head nodded more vigorously. And lastly I want you to come to the church service every Sunday morning for at least the next four weeks. Will you promise me that?"

There was always a catch thought Jimmy. Adults were always so clever at making him do things that he didn't want to do. However, maybe this trade wouldn't be so bad. At least he didn't have to wash the church. There was nothing worse than doing women's work.

"I promise," he said.

Father Murphy led him back inside to his study. It was a large bright square room with big windows and a high ceiling. Paintings of religious themes hung on the walls, and in the middle of the room sat a huge table. There were also a couple of shelves where rolled up parchments and books were neatly stacked row upon row, and behind the door a large trunk lay open, filled to the top with yellowing papers.

"Right, my boy, you can sit here," said Father Murphy pulling the big soft leather chair out that was tucked in behind the desk. Jimmy had never seen a chair so large before.

From the very top of one of the shelves the priest brought down a small wooden box. A battle scene was intricately carved into the lid and sides. Jimmy sat upright on the edge of the chair eager to be able to peer in as Father Murphy removed the lid. Inside lay an army of small carved wooden figurines, each one brightly painted in a rainbow of colours. There were knights on horseback, archers, foot soldiers and two pairs of kings and queens. The little hand delved inside and removed a blue, red and white swordsman.

“Remember to be careful with them Jimmy. I’m putting my trust in you now, so don’t let me down will you?”

The boy’s small round face peered up at him in wonderment. “I won’t hurt them. I promise.”

“Good lad. Well then you stay here and I’ll be back to check on you in a little while.”

The priest left the boy, hoping that he wouldn’t later regret his leniency with the kid. Jimmy Montgomery was a problem child, but it was hard to blame a boy whose father was a notorious drunk and womaniser and whose mother seemed to have little of the maternal instinct in her. She did come to church on a regular basis but he felt she did it more to get out of the house and away from her husband than in a sense of faith.

He wandered quietly back into the church and his heart began to race. Lauryl was still there, as he had hoped she would be. She was seated now before

the lit candles, their soft warm glow flickering over her solemn face — a face, he thought, that was even more beautiful than the ethereal statue of Mary who looked down upon her.

“Good morning Lauryl,” he said wandering over more than a little nervously and hoping it didn’t show. “I’m surprised to see you here this morning.” He cleared his throat, aware that it sounded shaky.

She looked up startled. She had obviously been deep in thought and unaware of his approach. For a moment her eyes fixed him to the spot. Their crystalline light blue had a subtle intensity that pierced him, as if she could see right through him. For a moment he was sure that she was not looking at him at all but at some place far behind him. He swallowed hard and was about to speak again when he saw her lips part to greet him — lips that were full and soft and blushed with such delicate colour as if smeared with wine.

“Good morning Father,” she said and abruptly turned back to stare into the candle light. “I came to put some flowers on my parents’ grave.”

With her eyes now taken off him he found himself able to move again. Somewhere deep inside him there was a seed of annoyance for being so intimidated by this young girl. Approaching her he had felt like a young foolish boy with his heart somewhere in his throat. He gave a quick cursory glance around to check that the church was still empty and then seated himself down beside her,

perhaps a little too close for civility. His thigh pressed against hers. He could feel the warmth of her leg on his and he felt his loins stir. She didn't move.

“For your dear Ma and Pa?” he asked, gesturing towards the two lit candles, realising now that within the coming week it would be a year since she had found her parents out on the farm, crushed to death beneath a toppled cart.

“Time has passed so quickly,” she replied fidgeting with a small white handkerchief.

“And you're still in mourning for them my dear. It is quite understandable.”

“Yes, I still miss them very much. I guess I've been dwelling on the past too much of late. It's just that I've had some problems on the farm you see. The sort of thing Dad was always able to take care of and I haven't been able to fix them because I've been feeling poorly. A slight fever I think.”

The word fever suddenly filled him with unnamed dread and he swallowed hard. Still he couldn't quite believe his luck. This girl, whom he revered, nay lusted for, was sitting here telling him just how vulnerable she was. It was an opportunity he had only but dreamed of and one he could not pass up. Placing a hand on her knee he mustered his most sympathetic priestly manner. “It must be very lonely for you up at that house all by yourself. Such a big property and no neighbours near.”

As soon as he had spoken he knew that he had

made an error in judgement. Now for the first time he felt her become aware of his closeness and he felt her body tense slightly. Perhaps it was the tone of his voice or the way he pressed himself against her. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. The silence between them remained a little too long for comfort before her reply finally came.

“I make out okay,” she said a little too defensively. “I’ve never really had need of other people’s company. Mum and Dad always taught me to be independent, and the farm keeps me very busy.”

The door which he had imagined open to him as a way to take this girl was closing. He looked for another. “But don’t you feel the need for a man in your life my dear? You’re a grown woman now. Perhaps a man’s company would ease your pain?”

“Ha!” she scoffed.

“Why do you laugh?” He asked. “A good strong man could help you manage . . . ”

“Many men have come knocking at my door Father, with their words of love and their gifts. But I am yet to meet a man whose heart is as true as his words.”

There was bitterness in her voice that he couldn’t quite fathom — something that hinted at a past experience.

“Perhaps those were ordinary men my dear. Maybe you need someone who can give you standing in this community as well as a strong arm.” He lifted his hand from her knee and passed

it behind her back locking his fingers into her long silken hair. He marvelled at how soft it felt and how its golden colour caught the light like sparks.

Her body stiffened measurably at his renewed touch. For a moment he thought about pulling back, but his confidence had grown and he was not about to give up now. This was a girl he had fantasised about every night since she had shown signs of womanhood. He had secretly watched her grow and mature. She had despairingly remained out of reach, protected fastidiously by her parents. He was never able to befriend her, to gain her confidence and her trust in him like he had so many other young minds. If you could get to them at an early age, make them trust you, then it was an easy matter, later on, to seduce them. But Lauryl had always been at a distance and now he had to approach her without there being any confidences between them. He had often wondered if her parents had been suspicious of him or if keeping themselves apart from others was just their way.

Now he no longer had the time or the patience to try and win this beauty over. He wanted her now, and there was but one other method left to him. He had to make this girl see that he was in a position of authority and that he could make life very difficult for her if he chose to do so. Besides, she was only a young woman, no more than a girl really. Regardless of her beauty what had he to fear?

“You know Lauryl . . . ,” he faltered looking for

the right words, realising there were none. So he said it bluntly. "I could make life so much better for you, if you'd let me."

For a moment it seemed as though his words had fallen on deaf ears.

"What do you mean?" she asked with unfeigned innocence.

He brushed her hair back from her cheek.

"Marry me," he said.

She turned and looked at him. "What! No, I cannot," she said trying hard to remain calm, but there was a horror on her face that she could not hide. It was a look that hurt him as much as any physical blow ever could. But he persisted. There was nothing to lose now.

"Why not Lauryl? Think of what I can offer you."

"I don't love you."

"You don't have to love me."

"STOP IT!" she cried, standing so suddenly that he didn't have time to release his hands from her hair. But it slipped through his fingers effortlessly anyway leaving behind only a few precious strands.

"You're our priest," she cried.

He stood too, looking around the church in panic, then in relief to find it still empty.

"Don't refuse me Lauryl. I'm a man as well as a priest and I have needs too, just like any other man," he said, his voice hardening as he reached

out to grab her arm. Her hand flew out so swiftly it caught him completely off guard and she struck him clean across the face with a resounding slap.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” she scolded. “How can you call yourself a man of God. At least those other men approached me with a mask of respect. You’re just an animal.”

For the first time in his life Father Murphy felt completely humiliated. His fantasy, one he had held for so many years was turning sour. The face and the body he coveted above all else now shunned him.

“Then lie with me Lauryl,” he stammered. “I’ll make it very much worth your while.”

“I’m not a common whore, preacher,” she spat, backing away. But he could see that there was also despair in her eyes and he knew she was about to flee.

“Please Lauryl.”

“Never.”

“Then if you do not, I’ll make life very unpleasant for you. You know I can. Do not refuse me Lauryl. I beg you.”

“Stay away from me,” she cried turning on her heels and running from the church. As she did so she dropped something that fluttered to the floor. He went over and bent to pick it up. It was a small silk handkerchief with her name embroidered delicately in each corner. He pressed the material to his face breathing deeply and inhaling the scent upon it.

He was not afraid that the girl would run and tell anyone. She was too private for that, and, besides, he knew there was no one in this town she was even remotely close to. She had no one to confide in. He was sure she would go straight home telling no one. She would hide up in that little house all alone, just her and her misery.

He wrapped the few strands of hair he still held into the handkerchief and placed it into his trouser pocket. There was despair in his heart for what had just occurred. Lauryl had rejected him outright and he still felt the sting of her hand across his cheek. He was lucky and thankful that no one had witnessed his humiliation at the hands of the girl, and the more he reflected upon it the more his despair turned to anger. He stood before her lit candles brooding, his face becoming criss-crossed with lines of rage until his thoughts became so dark that he reached out and extinguished the candles between his fingers.

CHAPTER TWO

Lauryl LeMont sat curled up in her daddy's big old rocking chair clutching a crumpled handkerchief with which she wiped at her raw and reddened nose. An ailment had taken a hold of her over the last couple of days. Fever now caused her to break out in hot and cold sweats and her head throbbed with an intense pressure that pounded from the inside of her skull above and behind her eyes. She had tried several home-made remedies that her mother used to give her for this sort of thing, but so far none seemed to have had much effect. She had also tried to cut down on her workload, doing only those chores that were absolutely necessary, hoping it would give her body the opportunity to recuperate. The daily attention that the farm's gardens and animals required was a necessity, but most of the household chores could wait. Even so, she found it very difficult to find time to relax.

Heavy work, like chopping firewood, caused her breathing to become laboured and her chest to feel sore and tight until even the effort of getting air into her lungs became painful. She often had to stop and rest or give up the chore altogether. Her sleep had also become very irregular and restless. These last few nights she had lain awake in a hot

sweat with the sheets tangled about her.

Now weary and exhausted she sat curled up in the rocking chair, her chin resting in one palm as she gazed distantly into the flames of a fire that crackled within the hearth. She could not help dwelling on the advances Father Murphy Dillins had made toward her.

His pretence of caring about her had been a thin veil that soon vanished once she made it clear she had no interest in him. She realised now that all the while they were talking he was fondling her, in all probability becoming aroused while he pressed himself against her. His face had been so close that she had felt his hot breath prickle the delicate hairs on the nape of her neck. She shivered, feeling violated just thinking about it.

As a girl she had sometimes seen the way he and other men had looked at her. With the priest, she had always believed that it was his rather cruel looking face and unfortunate features that had created that feeling of unease. It was easy to imagine the worst in a man so malevolent in looks, and she had discredited her fears as such. But now she knew that, behind the twisted face with its leering eyes, was an equally twisted mind. She wondered if perhaps her parents had known it too.

Now she felt isolated and more alone than ever. The LeMont farm was a very large property that lay south of the Belfry valley by about three hours' gentle ride. She had never liked going into Belfry

and avoided going into the town as much as possible. Men would openly leer at her, undressing her with their eyes. Some were married, and their wives would see the way their husbands looked at her and, of course, they hated her for it, as if it was her fault. She always dressed as conservatively as possible, but no matter how plain she tried to make herself the looks kept coming.

Even single women sneered at her. So, when she made the transition from adolescence into womanhood, she soon realised that she had no true friends in Belfry. The town shunned her. And now it seemed she was even an outcast from the church.

With all that had happened these past few years she had begun to ask questions of the faith her parents had so dutifully followed. She knew they would be horrified at her thoughts but it wasn't so easy to believe anymore when, for no apparent reason, her whole life had been turned upside down, and she was left abandoned and alone.

She wished that somehow she could get far away. Just pack up and go. But the fact was she could never leave the farm. It held too many precious memories. It was where she was born and raised and was all she had ever known. This house and its land were the culmination of a life's hard work for her parents. As much as she hated Belfry she was here to stay.

Boris, her dad's big black hunting dog stared

solemnly up at her from his place in front of the fire. His eyes seemed sorrowful, as if he could read her thoughts. She wondered how the animal, with his heavy black coat, could lie so close to a roaring hot fire without feeling extremely uncomfortable. One day she was sure, a spark was going to jump from the fire and set him alight.

“You look just how I feel,” she said to the animal whose heavy tail began thumping the floor in response. “You know you’re going to catch fire one day, don’t you?”

As if in accordance, a log split with a resounding crack and a puff of smoke billowed out into the room startling the dog. He jumped up and away from the hearth, a look of concern in his eyes as he regarded the fire apprehensively.

“Ha,” Lauryl laughed, springing from the rocker and grabbing a fist full of shaggy fur to ruffle. “See, that frightened you didn’t it?”

Boris put a big wet lick across her arm as she cuddled him around the neck. “My only friend,” she said burying her face in his fur.

Outside, rain started to pelt hard against the window, hitting the wooden shutters like pellets of lead. Several drops found their way down the large chimney and the fire hissed in response, causing Boris renewed consternation.

As the rain’s intensity increased Lauryl suddenly remembered she had left the barn doors wide open. In her fatigue she had forgotten to close the barn up

for the night. But it wasn't just the fact the rain was probably driving in through the large opening and wetting her grain stores that caused her concern. It was also because several large timber wolves had been in the area of late and now the horses and other barn animals lay exposed to possible attack.

She rose to her feet grabbing a candle lantern and making for the front door. She passed the blunderbuss that lay propped against the wall behind the door. She knew she should take it with her, but Boris was following close at her heels and the heavy weapon would just be too much of a weight in this weather and the black powder would more than likely get wet, rendering the thing useless anyway.

Outside, a wind drove the rain in under the eaves and into her face. She could just make out the dark shape of the barn in the distance. Pulling the delicate cover down over the candle lantern to prevent it extinguishing she stepped barefooted out of the doorway and hurried across the yard.

Boris hesitated for a moment knowing the folly of going out in such weather. But, as all faithful animals do, he decided to follow at the sight of Lauryl, lit like the ghost of a drowned woman, receding into the night.

Lauryl quickly became soaked to the skin. Soft cold mud squelched under her feet and between her toes as she made her way over to the barn holding the lantern close to protect it from the heavy rain.

As she made the last few steps she found that the doors had fortunately blown to. But, unlocked, they slammed noisily against their frames as the wind swirled around.

Inside, the rain sounded like thunder as it pelted down upon the thatched roof. In several places it had seeped through to form small muddy pools on the floor. She made a mental note to fix these leaking spots before winter truly set in and placed a small rock in each puddle to mark its location should it dry before she got around to fixing them. Fortunately they had fallen into harmless spaces and corners away from her animals and grain stores, so the job could wait until she felt up to the task.

She went over to the two horses who seemed quiet and relaxed enough. Checking that their blankets were on properly, she whispered a few reassuring words and gave each a scratch behind the ears. The lantern cast eerily long shadows on the walls as she went around the rest of the barn looking for problems. Everything else seemed to be dry and in its place. Boris whined, obviously eager to get back to the warmth of the fireside.

“All right boy, we’re going,” she said making for the door.

Outside, she placed the lantern in the mud and turned to push the doors fully closed. As she did so a sudden gust of wind buffeted the door, knocking her sideways. She tried to remain upright but the

conditions under foot were slippery. She lost her footing and fell full-length into the thick soft muck with a resounding plop. Wiping the mud from her face she sat up and looked down at herself. Her whole front was caked in runny black ooze which dribbled down in big globs. Slowly getting back to her feet she let fly with a loud expletive her mother would have been ashamed to hear. Boris barked, mistakenly thinking it a game.

Leaning on the two doors she fumbled with the latch and finally brought down the bar which would securely close them up for the night. Nothing was now getting in or out until morning.

The lantern sputtered out. But the light from the house was visible through the rain which hadn't let up any, and it was now just a matter of getting back and getting dry. Her chest ached and she was beginning to feel quite dizzy. Boris trotted on ahead as she left the lantern and headed back towards the house with the rain in her face.

Once back under the eaves she stood looking down at herself. Boris waited impatiently in front of the door which had shut itself in the swirling drafts. She was soaked to the bone and filthy dirty, her dress was ruined and her hair hung limp and ragged about her face. Agonisingly she stripped off, but the wet material had other ideas. Its sodden weight stuck to her. She heard the material tear as she forcibly and irritably wrestled with the stubborn garment, finally pulling it over her head and letting

it fall to the ground. She then used it to wipe her feet, removing as much of the mud as possible.

“Your turn mister,” she said grabbing one of Boris’s front paws and wiping it clean. In his wisdom the dog decided to take that moment to shake himself dry sending a spray of water droplets everywhere.

His paws cleaned, Lauryl opened the door and he bounded inside, making immediately for the warmth of the fire. Lauryl made her way down the hall to the wash room near the back of the house. There she removed the rest of her wet clothing and piled it all into a large wicker basket. Taking a clean dry cloth she wiped the remaining mud and water from her body and then used another towel on her hair.

Returning exhausted to the front room with a thick woollen blanket and a couple of oranges she found Boris back at his post by the fire. The flames had died down somewhat, so she placed a good number of fresh logs on top of the glowing embers and settled back. The heat felt good on her naked flesh and she spread her arms out before it, savouring the warmth. Going outside in that weather had been necessary but it hadn’t done a lot for her condition. Her head ached like hell and the muscles of her chest felt as tight as a drum.

“You’re going to have to move boy,” she said nudging Boris gently in the flank. He failed to

budge so she dug her knee into him a little harder. This time he moved aside begrudgingly and she pulled a big soft rug over to place in front of the hearth. Piling on some pillows she lay back again and began peeling the oranges. They were sweet and juicy and the liquid ran through her fingers. She flicked the peelings into the fire where they sizzled. Boris sat at the edge of the rug regarding her with pleading eyes that asked to be let back in front of the fire.

She patted a place beside her. "Come on then you big sap," she said. In a flash the dog was beside her, lying down with a heavy nasal sigh of contentment.

Father Murphy Dillins stood in the front doorway of his church. His Sunday evening service concluded, he was saying his good-byes to the last of the congregation as they left. They comprised the usual faithful lot who turned up rain or shine to hear his sermons. But now he couldn't wait to be rid of them. Tonight he had preached the Seventh Commandment. Pointing his fingers at the congregation and towards the heavens, gesticulating wildly with his arms, his voice booming and his eyes menacing, he had felt especially enthused tonight. The rain had started to hammer down on the church roof about half way through his sermon and he had been forced to raise his voice accordingly. It was at this moment that the idea had come to him in a

flash of inspiration as sharp as a crack of lightning. As he looked down upon his stunned audience he smiled inwardly to himself. As he spewed forth his rhetoric on fidelity to those upturned astonished faces, he planned his dirty deed.

As he stood at the podium in front of his captive audience he felt powerful and strong. He had standing in this community. People respected him and some feared him, and he liked that. He liked people to be scared of him. Lauryl LeMont on the other hand had made him feel weak, humiliated and small. She had slapped him, for God's sake. She had not recognised his authority, even when he had directly threatened her with it, and by not recognising his power she had in some measure taken part of it away. Well tonight he was going to take it back.

Yes, tonight was the perfect night. His house-keeper was not due back until tomorrow morning so there was no one to see him leave. Neither was it likely that anyone else would be out in this weather, especially on a Sunday night. So as he had hurled his words of hellfire and brimstone down at his cowering congregation, virtually throwing himself at them, he had been simply exhilarated in anticipation.

“Great sermon Father, most spirited indeed.” That was Douglas Cranski and his wife Millie. They ran a couple of small businesses in town. Douglas carved pipes and Millie fashioned

garments. Douglas was shaking his hand and grinning inanely. "The Seventh Commandment. One of my favorites."

"Thank you Douglas, I'm glad you found it so . . . entertaining," he replied, glancing at Millie who was unable to meet his gaze. "Sometimes people need to be reminded of the grass roots of religion. There's far too much infidelity around these days. Even in Belfry."

"Oh . . . really?" asked Douglas in a manner which bade Father Murphy to elaborate, his face changing to the intense interest of a dedicated gossip.

"Yes really. Confession may be good for the sinners but it does place a heavy burden on my shoulders from time to time. It's been a while since I heard your last confession Douglas."

"Ah," Douglas laughed, trying to make light of his blunder. "Quite so, Father, quite so. Well good night to you then," he said, taking his wife's arm and drawing away, aware through the priest's tone of voice that he had perhaps crossed the line of good manners.

"Good night Douglas, . . . Millie."

Millie Cranski shuffled away behind her husband mumbling a feeble "Good night Father" as she went. He knew Millie well. He knew her better than her feeble husband could ever have imagined. Millie was one of those regular confessors, a woman who lived life in a world of unfulfilled desires. The sort of desires she could never admit to anyone,

especially to Douglas, who would never be the sort of man who could satisfy them anyway.

The priest watched her go wondering just how her bony little body would stand up to a tumble with his brawny bulk. He pictured her briefly sitting astride him. But the vision vanished almost immediately to be replaced by the heavenly thought of Lauryl in her place.

When the last of the faithful few finally disappeared, scurrying down the rain swept road into the night, he shut and bolted the church doors, locking himself in. After hurriedly putting out the lamps and candles he hastened to his room where he removed his robes. There seemed not a moment to lose. He wanted as much time as the dark hours of night would provide. He unlocked a large chest from which he pulled a pair of old work trousers and a heavy woollen pullover. A pair of sturdy boots and a full-length waterproof skin coat topped off with a well worn ragged edged hat would complete his disguise. Even if he was seen now it was unlikely that anyone would recognise the town minister.

Digging deeper into the chest he removed two long barrelled pistols. He loaded each with a fresh charge of ball and powder and then tucked them into the front of his trousers. Lastly, from the very bottom of the chest he removed his most prized possession, a long thick black bullwhip, coiled like a serpent. Then he placed one of two lit candles on the window ledge beside his bed. The other he

placed in the washroom. Anyone passing by the church would see the light and think him to be reading or preparing for bed.

He left by the back door pausing just long enough to take a good hit of whiskey from a shiny tin flask kept in the pocket of his coat. The liquid burned the back of his throat as it slid down to sit warm in his belly. Finally, carrying his saddle out into the night rain which had at last begun to ease, he went around to the far side of the church, to a small stable, partially roofed. His horse stood under the covers taking shelter and regarded him suspiciously as he approached. She obviously didn't like the idea of going out in this sort of weather and made her disapproval known by irritably stamping her feet.

Saddling her in the almost complete darkness was frustrating and time consuming and wasn't helped by the mare's uncooperative mood. But he hadn't wanted to bring a lamp out with him for fear of being noticed. Finally it was done and he led the mare out to the graveyard, mounting her as he did so. At this point she seemed to accept the inevitable and settled into an easy walk. Making his way between the stones and out the back of the church grounds, he left Belfry behind.

The going was difficult and very soft under foot. The rain remained steady and didn't seem to want to let up. However his heavy coat kept most of him and, more importantly, the pistols dry. The thought

of Lauryl drove him on and at no time did he stop to reconsider what he was doing. He was motivated solely by his anger and his need to possess her. All he could think about was a naked Lauryl LeMont whimpering at his feet, her perfect body covered in red welts from his whip. He decided that after beating her into submission with a substantial whipping he would then use the whip to bind her and do as he pleased.

Of course it was unfortunate that he would have to finally kill her. He couldn't let her live to go running to the law. He wasn't on the best of terms with the law maker in Belfry and he couldn't risk Lauryl's accusations. Perhaps he would burn the house down with her body inside. It was a good way to cover up any evidence and no one would be the wiser. His face was set in a grimace of determination as he thought about all these things and his dark eyes shone in anticipation even though there was no moonlight. Moving like a shadow among shadows in a black landscape he continued steadily on towards what he was sure would be the best time of his life.

When he was far enough from town he steered the mare back toward the road. The going would be easier and safer and he was certain he would meet no one. There were now no dwellings between him and Lauryl. The rain had at last petered out to a drizzle as the homestead finally loomed up over the brow of a rise. It sat large and silent against the

overcast night sky. He redirected his horse so that he could make his approach from the side of the house where he was less likely to be spotted were she still awake. An old gnarled tree from which a disused child's rope swing still hung provided an excellent place for him to dismount and tether the horse. From under its low hanging boughs he was able to study the place confident of not being seen.

The house, now only a stone's throw away, was dark and quiet. A sprawling single-storey stone building with plenty of windows and all of them shuttered. A trellis ran along this side with a wildly over-grown climbing rose wrapped about it. It covered much of the wall and windows and he quickly dismissed it as an option for entry. The trellis wood was probably rotten in places and climbing through all those brambles would make just too much noise and cause too many difficulties.

He decided to take a look around the front. His boots squelched through the mud as he went, the noise irritatingly loud in the otherwise still night now that the rain had finally stopped. Here there were four large windows separated by a central door. Below the windows were a number of unkempt bushes growing amongst tall weeds in what must once have been a small colourful garden. These windows were shuttered but unobstructed and now he froze, for the first time feeling a little

trepidation. The two far windows were dimly lit. The light from them may well have gone unnoticed on a moon-lit night. But because this night was so dark they stood out like beacons from this distance — two soft orange squares floating in a sea of blackness.

Then from somewhere far behind him the night let loose a howl to curdle the blood. The hair on the nape of his neck rose at the sound and he hesitated at hearing his horse's nervous whinny. No he thought, nothing was going to stop him now. The beast had been too far away to be of any importance. He was here now outside Lauryl's home. She was only a matter of feet away, helpless and alone. This unearthly night belonged to him and him alone. He would not be denied.

The sound of the mud under foot had a sickeningly obscene quality to it as he trod softly over to one of the lit windows. The shutters were pulled tightly and he pressed his nose up against them. Through the slats he could see the inside panes were covered in a thin layer of water vapour as if someone had a pot on the boil beneath them. He cursed quietly to himself unable to see a thing through the veil of condensation. He shifted around trying to find a place where he could see clearly into the room. Finally to his relief he found one. In the bottom corner of one of the panes was a small clear spot, probably where a slight draft circulated through a crack between glass and stone. It was

just enough for him to put his eye to and see into the room. What he saw took his breath away.

Before him Lauryl lay sleeping in full view, an image more intoxicating than any dream he could have imagined. The flesh of his every fantasy lay sprawled and naked on the floor before a huge open hearth. The embers of the dying fire still glowed hot and cast a warm orange light over the room. A woollen blanket lay partially over her midriff, twisted and twined about her while a slick sheen of perspiration shone on her exposed skin. The myriad tiny beads caught the firelight and sparkled like a thousand tiny gems. Nothing in any of his fantasies had ever prepared him for this sight. Never had he imagined her like this.

He crouched at the window for the longest time unable to tear his eyes away. Transfixed by her beauty he let his undeviating eyes roam her body from head to toe, savouring the gentle rise and fall of her glistening breasts with each breath captured by the delicate flicker of remaining fire light. He marvelled at the length and firmness of her legs, the tautness of her abdomen and the soft tuft of dark hair below.

Then as the firelight slowly waned and began casting her into deeper shadow he found himself suddenly free of the spell which had held him watching for so long. He decided that his entry would be made by directly crashing through the window. It would give her little or no time to react

and he would be upon her before she had even a chance to fully awaken.

But in the last seconds before he tore his eyes away from this voyeuristic dream something else caught his attention. A movement at her side. Something as black as the shadows. Something that had small wisps of steam rising from it. He had been so riveted by the sight of Lauryl that he had failed to see the thing that lay in shadow on the other side of her, its snout pressed against her ribs.

As his eyes narrowed, trying to see by the quickly fading fire just what it was, another howl broke the stillness of the night. It was still some distance away but certainly getting closer. His horse whinnied in clear distress wanting to be away from this place, and he too felt his nerve starting to give. Inside, the thing that lay with Lauryl, perhaps awoken by the howling or by the horse's protests, suddenly raised its head and looked directly at him.

He fell back in shock, stumbling away from the window. He tripped over a bush as he recoiled and crashed down to land heavily upon the soil. He had seen its eyes — two round glowing discs as hot as the fire's coals, framed in a thick inky black head of matted fur. Its teeth were bared with fangs white and menacing, its bulk easily that of a man. He panicked, picked himself up and ran for his horse as the thing inside the house threw itself toward

the window scratching at the glass and barking insanely.

Lauryl woke violently to the sound of Boris fiercely barking beneath the big front window. Her head spun nauseatingly at being brought suddenly out of such a deathly heavy sleep. Her body, now wracked with fever, felt incredibly weak and beads of sweat trickled into her eyes, stinging them as she slowly sat up.

“Boris!” she scolded feebly. “What’s the matter? . . . Stop it boy you’re frightening me.”

But the dog would not calm down. Something outside had obviously agitated him. Getting to her feet she pulled the sheet around her and went to peer out the window. She could see nothing through the build up of condensation and even when she wiped at it the night was too dark to discern anything. She grabbed her daddy’s gun from behind the door and went into the darkened lobby. The weapon felt incredibly heavy in her aching arms and carrying it was made even more difficult as she tried to keep the sheet around her at the same time.

Boris followed her to the front door barking incessantly. No sooner had she opened it than she realised her mistake. The dog pushed furiously past her and disappeared out into the night in a flurry of noise. He was a big dog, tough and strong, but all the same she worried about him, not knowing what was out there.

“Boris come back,” she called all too weakly.

She took a single step outside to see where he had gone and caught sight of a faint figure moving at speed away from the house. It was a rider and Boris was giving chase. She cocked the gun, pulling the heavy hammer back with all the strength that remained to her. Letting the sheet slip to the ground she hefted the long muzzle, bringing it up only to waist height as she hadn’t the strength to heave it up to her shoulder. She didn’t expect to hit anything but she wanted whoever that person was to know she was not incapable of defending herself.

Swinging the barrel to point in the general direction of the disappearing rider she pulled the trigger. The blunderbuss’s report sounded like thunder in her ears and a huge bright flash of orange flame as long as the gun itself exploded from its end. The massive recoil threw her back inside the doorway to sprawl unceremoniously on the floor and a cloud of sweet smelling smoke engulfed her. She sat up with her back against the wall resting for a few moments while the ringing in her ears subsided. Then, sliding the gun away from her, she dragged herself to her feet and regathered the blanket from the doorway. The rider had gone but she could hear the unmistakable sound of Boris still in pursuit. Then suddenly she heard the sound of another gunshot. A sharp distant crack and ominously Boris stopped barking. She

stood frozen to the spot, her ears trying to pick up any sound at all from her faithful companion, her heart sinking with a sickly feeling, tears beginning to well in her eyes. She held her breath but there was only silence. Then a call did finally reach out to her from the night. The hideous sound of howling wolves too close for comfort.

Tears raced down her cheeks as she called in vain for her dog until finally she choked on grief and fear. She took several steps out into the inky blackness, but the renewed howling stopped her as she stood on the brink of going out after him. Torn between the need to find her only companion and the need to remain safe, she began to shiver. The sweat on her body had turned icy cold and it was now taking awareness of the adrenaline of the last few moments. To go out again, naked, would be sheer suicide. She stumbled back towards the safety of the house totally at a loss for any sort of action even though she knew she was too weak to do anything. Then just before she made it inside another sound reached her ears, a sound she would never ever forget. Locking the door behind her she collapsed to the floor utterly grief stricken.

Father Murphy had reached his horse just as the mare was starting to panic and pull frantically at its tethered reins. No sooner had he mounted her than she took off like the wind with him unable to do anything but hold on desperately. The black

beast had followed him out into the night. He was sure Lauryl had sent it after him, to tear him to shreds no doubt. As the horse carried him swiftly away into the black fields he heard the sound of a gunshot. A shattering boom that sounded almost as thunderous as a cannon. The lead ball had screamed through the air somewhere overhead and, deep within him, his anger began to flare anew at the indignity of being chased off like a scared schoolboy.

Somewhere in front of him the howling had started to close in, while behind him the black beast gave chase. His horse plunged recklessly into a creek swollen by the recent rain and suddenly found itself floundering in deep water. Vainly she tried to scramble up the opposite bank which was too muddy and far too steep. Turning, she climbed the embankment from which she had just thrown herself. With the loss of those precious few moments the black hound was almost upon them. Instinct took over and Father Murphy drew a pistol and fired. For an agonising split second the powder in the pan gave nothing but a weak hiss and then his hand seemed to shoot forth a ball of orange flame at the shape that barrelled towards them.

Miraculously he heard the thumping impact of the slug as it found its mark. He saw the hound tumble to the ground and writhe in pain. But, as he was about to draw his second pistol, the sound of

splashing from downstream signalled the arrival of the wolves. Turning the frothing mare upstream he galloped madly away. As he did so he wondered whether Lauryl had also sent these beasts against him. Strangely, another thought entered his mind. He wondered if the witch slept with them also.

The wolves' attention had been focused squarely on the horse and rider. They had caught his scent from far down wind, and hungrily they had come running. Even the gunshots had not deterred the ardour of their empty stomachs. Now, however, they smelled fresh blood, strong and sweet. All thoughts of the horseman disappeared as they closed in on the badly wounded dog. A big black dog, as big as any of them, they circled him furtively growling and gnashing their teeth. Razor sharp teeth dripped foaming saliva from mouths with lips drawn back in ferocious smiles. They were smiling because they could see that their prey was fallen. He was down but not yet out, although in another couple of minutes the loss of blood would be too great for any and all resistance.

The wolves were hungry and full of blood lust and would not wait another moment. The first of their number to charge in paid for his miscalculation of the dog's weakness and was savagely inflicted with a hideous wound about the neck. The others quickly joined the fray and, though the dog put up a spirited fight, it was one

he could never win. The wolves tore him to pieces, and as they did so his cries of agony suffused the night air and were carried in waves of torment to the ears of his mistress.