

FLICKER

Rain glanced off my shoes like spilled secrets. A June downpour in Minnesota's St. Croix Valley left the street a blur of wet shadows. For the first time since graduating last year, I stepped off the curb in front of old St. Gabriel's arched wooden doors and crossed over to attend prayer group at the Campus Ministry Center.

Students clustered in the back of the chapel near the faux marble Madonna while faculty sorted themselves out in pecking order. On the altar, the ever-present beeswax candle flickered inside a tall hurricane glass, like Morse code from a ship's signal lamp: *God is here*. I settled into an empty pew and rubbed the bare spot at the base of the fourth finger on my left hand. Only six months ago, the promise of marriage and family sparkled. I watched the flame pulse.

At the last "Amen," I roused to check my watch. If I hurried, I could meet friends at the coffeehouse for Rocky Mountain High Night. When I looked up, Father Darren's intense dark eyes were trained on me—one of the reasons I stopped going to prayer group senior year.

"A treat to see you again, Meg. Heard you're visiting the sick for St. Gabe's now."

I nodded a quick acknowledgement and stood to leave.

Faculty women circled the rookie priest who looked like he spent more time in the gym than on his knees. They gushed over his homily on evil. As I passed, his hand slithered around my waist. I flinched, and he dropped his arm. His ploys for attention rivaled a barfly's. But he wore the collar—I told myself he was harmless. Mrs. Gregg eyed the maneuver, then looked away. She might have been the object of his attentions thirty years ago. Without missing a beat, Father Darren delivered the punchline to a joke. Something about a banana and Eve's apple. I went to the coatrack to get my trench. Father Darren caught up with me. "Stay a few minutes? Want to show you something."

Born and bred Catholic, one does not say no to a priest. "Sure, what's up?"

"Let's take the shortcut." He motioned for me to follow.

We left the gleaming limestone walls of the chapel and entered a dimly lit corridor. Father Darren said the passage led to the fellowship hall. A stippled length of sallow paint between all that was sacred and everything else. My eyes took a minute to adjust.

I hurried to keep up. Halfway down the hall, he stopped short, and I stumbled into him. He missed my lips but nicked a kiss on the cheek. My neck went taut. I stepped out of range. A move any two-bit blind date might make, not a priest.

He slicked back his coarse jet hair. "Only a kiss. No big deal. Relax."

His furtive dodge left me clammy. "What was it you wanted to show me?"

He moved ahead and pulled a pack of Winchesters from his pocket. Must have thought they were still cool. Nobody I knew smoked the little cigars anymore. He lit one and offered it to me like the man in their ads. When I refused, he blew a smoke ring.

I let a safe number of steps fall between us. If I bolted back to the chapel, everyone from prayer group would be gone by now. And if he pursued me? Though no taller than myself, his thick build could fell me like a sapling. Was I overreacting? An exit sign flashed at the end of the corridor—the fellowship hall on the other side. Only a few more yards.

He stopped at a recessed doorway and turned the knob. “Here we are.”

The fading light of day cast shadows on low objects in the room. A storeroom? When he flipped the light switch, we were steps from the foot of a mattress on the floor.

I arched my back against the door to keep it open. Stay calm, I told myself. Don’t yell. Pretend to go along— then run like hell. When Dad forced himself on Mom and she yelled, terrible things happened. He hit her.

Father Darren didn’t grab me. He pointed to a large painting hanging above the bed.

I stared at bold strokes of paint. Fierce reds, lime, purple. Abstract, but no Picasso.

He began to say words, but it was as if he was speaking underwater. The echo-like belches of syllables slowly took on meaning: “I want to give it away, but she won’t let me.”

Who was he talking about? Who was *she*?

He turned to stand squarely in front of me. “Well? Isn’t it mine now?”

Gauze seemed to cover my mouth.

He lowered his brow toward me, demanding an answer. “Can’t I do what I want with it?”

My tongue felt dry as cotton balls.

“You’ll have to ask her about it.” Whoever she was. “I have to go now.”

He lurched to one side. “Go.”

My sweater snagged as I peeled away. I ripped the thread loose and rushed past the exit sign. A roomful of laughing couples sat in the fellowship hall—the weekly Cana marriage prep class.

God, I ask you for love and you give me a snake?

Once outside, I threw on my trench and ran through drizzle to St. Gabe’s parking lot. Searched my purse for car keys and sank into the roar of the engine.

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Home. I cranked the double cylinder lock on my door. Safe. My breath came in drifts as I steadied myself at the kitchen table. Solid cherrywood. A four-seater from a fire sale, only a few scorch marks. I looped through the apartment until dropping into an easy chair. The old Cogswell my brother reupholstered for me. When Eddie's hands weren't wrapped around a bottle of vodka, he worked for one of the best furniture shops in St. Paul.

A shiver of cold pinpricks crawled down my spine, exactly like when Eddie and I huddled in the hallway woken by our parents' fights. I wished my brother were here. I dialed his number. Hank answered. Good. He gave the phone to Eddie.

I relayed the evening's events. The part about a priest coming onto me and leading me to some sort of bedroom. Not the part about a painting. A woman. More than I could explain.

"I never understood your church thing, Meg. I cut that cord a long time ago."

When our parents divorced, Sunday Mass became my private oasis before court-ordered visitations with Dad. Church was the beautiful, quiet place where I could dream of someday making a happy family, a good marriage, a respectable life.

"Like it's my fault for being in church in the first place?"

"Okay, so the guy's a little off. Priests aren't all holy, you know."

I knew that much. At my fiancé's frat parties, the chaplain sat in a remote corner—soused. My history prof amassed toy Crusader armies. Foibles and quirks. Most of the Clems, as we called the Order of Clement priests who ran the college, seemed good men, caring teachers.

"But why me?"

"I suppose he can't go after students, and faculty are dicey. You're fair game. A grad."

"Fair game?"

"Probably figures any woman in her twenties is on the Pill these days. Plus, you're not bad to look at, Kitten. No Raquel Welch, but cute. Like Sally Field."

"Gee, thanks. Should I tell the pastor a miscreant priest wants a go at the girl next door?"

"Oh sure, tell the pastor—or the bishop. It's not like they wouldn't know the guy's a jerk. Clergy are more than acquainted with each other. Probably glad it's women he goes after and not the other way. Hang out with me and Hank sometime. You'd be surprised who cruises the joint."

I twisted the telephone cord. "So, wise man of the world, what should I do?"

“For sure, don’t go back there.”

I’d lost a month’s pay when the teacher strike hit. Churches don’t strike. The job at St. Gabe’s guaranteed security.

I sat up after our call, rocking in Grandma’s well-worn spindleback. It wasn’t fair that I had to cower while Father Darren swaggered across campus. But Eddie had a point. If I tried to tell anyone, they wouldn’t believe me. I’d heard all the jokes about women throwing themselves at hapless priests. I would be a joke.

As the house cooled down for the night, I got a sweatshirt from my closet. The rosary Mom gave me at graduation lay on the dresser. *Mary, mother of God, give me strength.*

I boiled water for tea and debated quitting. But where would I go? I had known St. Gabe’s since I was ten. After the divorce, Mom moved us from Minneapolis to Shady Bluff to be closer to her sister’s family. A friendly town in a scenic river valley—and a cheaper cost of living. The steeple rose like a beacon for parents wanting to send their kids to college. The Order of Clement built the church and Incarnatus University on donated land back when lumber mills thrived. They never turned down a promising student. That’s how I got there—and loans.

How did Father Darren ever get to be a Clem? He wore his alb like a pure white teabag, hiding the dark bits inside. I dumped my hot water and turned off the lights. I needed a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow, I would stay on my side of the street.

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When Eileen insisted I go out with the gang on the weekend, I didn’t object. Maybe it would dispel the lingering stench of my encounter with Father Darren and his little cigar.

Just like in college, my former roommate organized the social scene. “You’ll love Irish ceili dancing, Meg. You missed a lot of fun last time.” We drove together to Kelly’s Pub.

I tripped on my first dance step. The lead guitar player saluted me from the stage. I must have looked ridiculous. Or was he saluting my ballet top that showed a bit of skin unlike the puff-sleeved polyester blouses on either side of me? I chose the open-neck top to stay cool in the crowded pub—also to deter any thought I might be headed for the convent. A decade earlier, working for the Church had meant a fast track to the nunnery.

When the band closed out their set of jigs and reels, the guitarist took center stage. “Let’s change the pace and give some respect to our local boy made good.” He strummed into Bob Dylan’s “Shelter from the Storm,” cueing patrons for the refrain. He had a fine voice, and the crowd begged for more, but he unplugged after a couple of verses.

During the break, he came over to chat up our lively group of newcomers. Eileen and Sheila vied for his attention with fawning quips. His uncombed tufts of dark curly hair seemed out of place

with the clean wedge of his body. He projected his weight toward me like a swimmer leaning into the starting block for a dive.

“You’re a natural on your toes,” he said. “By the way, the name’s Sean.”

“Meg. Thanks, but you’re a bad liar.”

“No,” he chuckled. “I wouldn’t lie about anything so serious.”

“Your band. Is this what you do for a living?”

“The band is for fun. I work at the *Herald*—sports reporter. And do you dance for a living?”

Sean’s grin was all mischief. He asked the usual questions, and I told him my tale about the strike sapping all joy from my first year of teaching. Sean said the city editor foresaw a hot summer for teachers followed by “a late start” to school in the fall. I spilled the beans about my backup plan, visiting St. Gabe’s sick and elderly parishioners.

Sean eyed my half-finished beer and asked if I wanted a refill. I suspected the trip to the bar gave him an excuse to flee from “an almost-nun.”

“Leave it to Meg the Magnet,” teased Eileen. “Sheila and I tried to catch Sean’s eye last week.” Sheila threw imaginary darts at me from the other side of the table.

A beefy hand nudged my shoulder. “Here’s your cold one.” Sean sat down. His tone changed from idle gab to quiet conversation. “St. Gabe’s, huh? I studied journalism at Incarnatus University.” We clunked beer mugs in tribute to our alma mater. “You could do worse. True confession—I spent time in the Peace Corps, Honduras, to beat the Vietnam draft.”

I smiled, full of relief. I could work for the parish and still date a nice guy who sought an altruistic escape—like me.

Sean and I made a date to see *Star Wars*.

Eileen grilled me on the way home. “About time you found someone to take your mind off Jake. It’s been, what, six months?”

“Six and a half.”

Eileen bit her lip. She’d never hidden her distaste for Jake. A smart, straight-up guy, hardworking, a good future ahead of him—but all Eileen saw was his stalling, which ended for good the last time he pushed back the wedding date, and I threw his ring on the ground. Whatever magic I felt with him—and I admit it wasn’t much, not even when it was good—had faded under the weight of his father’s disapproval of my wrong-side-of-the tracks family.

“There’s a much better match for you, I know it,” she said, not for the first time.

“Okay, the truth—I don’t know if I loved him. They say you’ll know when it’s *the one*. But the magic wasn’t there.”

“Oh, Meg, that’s sad.” I was grateful Eileen didn’t say I told you so, like my mother had.

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In the two weeks since taking the job at St. Gabe’s, I’d visited Adele three times. The pastor recommended extra attention considering her illness—and her expected bequest. Today I found Adele out on her lawn, peering up at a big old maple.

“My kitty’s stuck in that tree,” she rasped. “Daisy never did anything like this before.”

I took a deep breath. Father Mack had said nothing about rescuing cats.

Adele let me wrap a terry towel over a broom to coax the cat down. As I searched tree limbs for the tabby, the late afternoon sun nearly blinded me. When the cat let out a wail like a banshee, I spotted her. While I poked nearby branches, Adele paced the scrawny lawn, clutching a thick brown sweater around her stooped shoulders. Though a balmy day, she shivered.

“Why don’t you go inside, Adele? You’ll catch cold out here.”

“I’ll die of the cancer first, Missy Meg. But Daisy, what’ll become of her?”

Adele kept watch from the porch while I continued my efforts. It wasn’t long before I noticed someone parking in front of my VW Bug. A sky blue ’77 Chevy Caprice. Swank car for the neighborhood. A rugged looking man ambled into our predicament.

“Nice day to climb a tree.”

“Daisy-the-cat thought so.”

The man laughed. “If I saw that broomstick contraption coming at me, I might run too.”

“You have a better idea?” Geez.

He rolled up his shirtsleeves. “Can I be of assistance?” Mystery man looked directly at my face, not halfway down my blouse like men on the make at the disco.

Adele limped over to us in fuzzy slippers. “Welcome to the party.”

The tabby hunkered her stripes around a thick limb.

I carefully angled the broom toward her again, as if I knew what I was doing. “This method worked for my cousin’s cat, but Daisy’s not taking the bait.”

“Bet she’s scared.” He surveyed the situation. “You have the right notion, letting her paws catch on a towel. Too bad the tree doesn’t have more of a pitch. She’d probably come down on her own.” His attention shifted to Adele. “Do you have a ladder—more towels—twine?”

Adele’s face brightened. “I see, make a ramp for her. Clever. My son keeps an extension ladder in the garage.” She told me where to find towels and twine in the house. Her trembling hand grasped my arm for support getting up the porch steps. “I’ll wait here. Got a headache.” She settled into a wicker chair.

“We’ll get her down. Don’t you worry,” I said.

The man carried the ladder across the lawn like a pro. Summer tanned. Easy stride. A thatch of hair fell on his forehead like late-season dune grass on the river bluffs I loved to hike.

We worked across from each other, wrapping towels rung to rung and securing them with twine. He came over and knelt beside me. “Let me tighten that for you.” He tugged the twine and knotted it like a seasoned sailor. His thigh brushed against my khaki skirt. “Beg pardon.” He caught my eye, a broad smile spreading across his face. Deep dimples framed his grin.

I hadn’t felt a tussle of sparks in a while. Sean? Nice, very nice, but ...

I ran my fingers through the Farrah Fawcett curls I’d taken time to style that morning. Lucky chance I hadn’t twisted my mahogany mop into its usual neat knot.

Once we got the ladder-ramp leaned against the tree, we sat on the porch steps and waited for Daisy to figure things out. Adele snoozed on the broad porch.

“You’re a good neighbor,” I said, “but you don’t have to stay. Daisy’ll make it down.”

“I’m more like a sometimes Samaritan. Driving back from the clinic, saw what looked like trouble. Have to see this thing through now.”

He looked rather healthy to be going to the clinic, though older than my ex-fiancé who grabbed meds for every sneeze. Ah, I thought, the good Samaritan must be a doctor. Of course.

“See anybody from *M*A*S*H** at the clinic?”

His eyes scrunched into a twinkle. “Not today.” He propped his elbows on the step, as relaxed as if sitting on sleek Naugahyde. “Does your cat do this often?”

“Daisy’s not mine. I came to visit Adele and found her out here in a fit.” Tucked my hair behind my ear, neglecting to tell him I worked for the parish. Would probably think I was a nun.

“Is Adele your aunt? Grandma?”

A sudden meow saved me from answering. Daisy bounced into Adele's lap. The sleepy woman jarred from her nap and stroked the cat until it purred contentedly.

The man stood, hooking his thumbs into his belt. "A good day's work."

Adele looked up from nuzzling her furry friend. "How can I thank you, young man?"

He put one foot on the step and held out his hand to shake hers. "I should introduce myself. Andy Vogel. Most people call me Father Andy."

Father Andy? A priest?

He offered his hand to me. A warm, firm handshake. I covered a cough. My cheeks felt flush.

"I don't know what we would have done if you hadn't come along, Father," said Adele.

"The young lady had things well underway. Glad to help."

I undid the twine and folded the towels. "Let's get things put back to rights."

Father Andy bounded over to help me put away the ladder. Two strong hands laced over mine from the other side. A waft of sandalwood soap. When he hoisted the ladder onto its garage hooks, I tried not to notice the breadth of his back. I picked up a dusty yellow flowerpot in the corner. For sure, Adele would like a "Daisy" plant. I tucked it under my arm to take home. Lost for small talk, I asked Father Andy what parish he lived in—so I could avoid it.

"I'm staying at Incarnatus University between assignments. Got back from the Algerian refugee mission a couple months ago. Waiting for my next gig. What about you?"

Incarnatus? The university spawned by St. Gabriel the Archangel Parish? That meant he was a Clem. Missions—hard work for a priest. What about me? "I started working at St. Gabe's a few weeks ago." I glanced up to measure the effect of my news.

Father Andy thumped the rusted-out Rambler taking up space in the garage. An old chamois cloth lay on the hood. He took a few swipes at the car before twisting the chamois into a pretzel.

"Seems all roads lead to St. Gabe's in this town. What do you do there?"

"Hand me that rag." I wiped grime from the flowerpot. "I work with Ruth Jordeen in the Eldercare program. Ruth takes care of the practical needs, and I bring Communion to shut-ins, visit the sick—and occasionally rescue cats."

Father Andy kicked a tire. "Likely we'll cross paths again. Ruth sends me on runs for senior citizens' doctor appointments. Returning from one now. Where were you before, Sister...?"

So much for curling my hair. “Margaret Joyce. *Most people call me Meg.* I’m not a Sister.” Father Andy stepped back. “Sorry. I naturally assumed. Not many laypeople work in parishes, or bring Communion, or ...” His words fell flat on the cement floor.

This wasn’t my first choice. My plan for college-marriage-kids? Up a tree.

“Can’t regular people visit the sick? It’s a corporal work of mercy, last time I heard.”

My breath wheezed short. I wanted to do meaningful work, but also marry and have children—with the kind of guy who might help coax a cat out of a tree. Not this one though.

A tide tossed in his deep-set eyes. “Forgive my clumsiness?”

“Guess the feline adventure put me on edge.”

He adjusted the ladder, making sure it held solid. “I should say good-bye to Adele and get Father Mack’s Caprice back before he thinks I made off with it.”

I managed half a smile as he waved and drove off. A capricious spin of the wheel. Father Andy would return to the missions, hopefully sooner than later. I would never see him again. Never have to put a lid on impious thoughts. Never have to hear his voice, calm on the surface but with a thousand rushing rivers beneath.

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