

WHATEVER BECAME OF SIN?

a novel
by

B. Roman

Prologue

New Orleans, 2005

He waits apprehensively in the shadowy alcoves until the last parishioner leaves the church. Confident now that no one will see him, the man slips quickly through the weighty red velvet curtain of the confessional, lowers himself onto the padded, solid oak kneeling rack, and makes the ritualistic sign of the cross. All that separates him now from salvation -- or is it damnation? -- is a thin mesh screen between himself and the elderly parish priest.

The holy man offers a blessing in Latin then pauses to listen to yet one more confession.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been four years since my last confession."

"What brings you here now, after all this time?" The old priest expects the same old mundane excuses that confessors always offer: "*...I haven't had time... I've been afraid to come...didn't really know what to confess...*" and is perfunctory in tone.

The confessor, on the other hand, feels beads of sweat form on his brow, and the nervous knot in his stomach tightens, threatening nausea.

"I don't know where to begin. It's so complicated... perhaps incomprehensible."

"Just start at the beginning and tell me what troubles you." The priest stifles a yawn.

"Everything is about to come crashing down around me and I can't let that happen. But I don't know if I can stop it. Or even if I should."

Cryptic meanderings are not what the priest cares to hear right now and he exhales, on the edge of impatience.

“Is it the shame of the sin that disturbs you, or the fear that it will be somehow revealed?”

“Would you think me cold if I said it is the revelation that terrifies me? Believe me, Father, I am not one for harboring guilt, though God knows I have every reason to. I’m here to find strength, and forgiveness, but I don’t think even God could forgive what I’ve done.”

Hunger gnaws at the priest’s gut and he silently beseeches the man to get on with it. This is the last confession of the afternoon and he still has to prepare his sermon for evening mass. “God forgives all,” he recites the mantra. “*Please* - tell me the nature of your sin.”

There is an audible taking in of breath and then a shaky exhalation as the man shores himself up to articulate his transgressions. After a painful pause, an obvious struggle with his conscience, he forces out the words, whispering lest someone else overhear, even though the sanctuary is deserted.

“They wanted me to kill her...but I wouldn’t do it. I *couldn’t* do it...”

The priest shifts his position to attention, and his tired voice reflects alertness. “...to kill? Who?”

“The baby girl. They wanted me to kill her. I couldn’t bear to, so I hid her away, where no one would ever find her, where she would be safe.”

“You saved a child’s life? What you did was a good thing, not an evil one.”

“No, you don’t understand,” the man whispers fervently now. “In hiding her away I took an innocent child from her mother and father. I had no choice. I had to do it to save her.”

“You kidnapped a child? How could you get away with this? Weren’t there people – authorities, the parents -

searching for this child?"

"No. They never searched for her, Father. You see, they never even knew she was gone. We...I...replaced her at birth with another newborn, and the parents were none the wiser. Then, sadly, this child, the new child they believed was theirs, died tragically, leaving an unfillable void in their lives. I..."

"Wait! Wait! *Another* newborn? You stole a child from its parents and hid that one away, then gave a different child to these same, unsuspecting parents? You stole *two* babies from their natural parents and switched their identities?"

Even the priest who has heard it all expresses revulsion. He makes the sign of the Cross for his unpriestly feelings about this faceless man, wishing somehow he was identifiable through the blasted opaque screen.

"Yes. I stole them both, their identities and perhaps their souls as well. I didn't do it alone," he replies, as though the involvement of others mitigated the crime.

The priest sighs deeply and probes deeper, hoping for a clue of some kind, something that would help him solve this mystery that the man clearly does not want solved.

"And what did you do with the other child?"

"Please don't ask me. I can't tell you, Father. Not just for my sake but for the child's. If the people involved discover she is still alive, they will kill her. I have no doubt about it."

The priest broods a moment, not knowing which of a million questions to ask first. So he asks the first that comes to mind. "When? When did all of this happen?"

"Twelve years ago, Father."

"Twelve years! Holy Mother of God," he blurts out, then restrains himself. "Ahem... How...?"

There is a startling silence, and the man braces himself for the interrogation: *How is this possible? How could you get away with such a deed? How could you even devise such a treacherous plot? And why? In heaven's name, why?* But, surprisingly, the questions never come. If they were asked, how could he explain with any justification that he did it for *her*?

For Trina.

How could he describe Trina? Oh, sweet, delicious Trina. Her skin so flawless and white, creamy white like fresh, delectable whipped cream that you dip your fingers into and blissfully lick off. Velvety to the touch and to the tongue. Her smooth flesh inviting and welcoming his own flesh, fragrant with the smells of youth and innocence and lust all at once. From the moment he had laid eyes on her eyes, smiled in response to her smile, pressed his lips to her virginal, pouty lips, he knew he would be enslaved to her forever, body and soul, would love her and commit any sin for her, with her, because of her.

She is the reason he is here now, kneeling before God and God's earthly liaison, confessing the unpardonable, revealing the unspeakable. And yet, not all of it. Just bits and pieces of it to assuage his guilt in cowardly increments. For if he told all, even to this priest, it would be the end of him. Some of it - the worst of it - had to be kept secret a while longer.

"And now, after all these many years," the Priest finally pronounces, trying to be nonjudgmental as priests are obliged to be, but finding it nearly impossible, "you confess to me, yet you seem to express little remorse. You offer no compelling excuse or explanation."

"I'm more confused than remorseful, Father. For years, I believed what I did was right for all concerned. And now

I know I was blind to my own selfish desires. It's crazy and complicated, I know. I'm ambiguous because I don't know just how much to tell you without revealing too much. I sense some impending doom. I face each day with a knot in my gut that tightens like a noose around my neck. Yet, I'm powerless to do anything, gutless to *want* to do anything, hoping maybe I'll walk away unscathed somehow. But that's utter fantasy. It will catch up to me. I only know I need your absolution before it's too late to ask for it."

"In God's eyes, your sins are already absolved. In the eyes of the world, the only way to assuage your feelings of guilt is to confess to the parents, tell them where their real daughter is."

The man shakes his head dismissing the suggestion. "Obviously, I haven't the courage, or the integrity to do that."

"Then, tell *me* and I will tell them where the child is. You will remain anonymous, protected by the confessional."

"No, no. It wouldn't be long before my involvement was discovered. If it is, then surely everything I've worked for all these years, every dream and ambition I have cultivated will be destroyed."

"You said, 'they' wanted you to kill her. Who are these people who would ask you to do such an evil thing? What hold did they have over you?"

"People with enormous power, Father. Enormous power over people's lives."

"There is only one power, my son. The power of God's Truth."

"In an ideal world, perhaps, but not in the real world. In our world truth becomes a distortion, and the line

between good and evil is blurred. Once this kind of power exerts its hold over you, there is no way to free yourself. No way at all."

The priest anguishes as to why, oh why do people come in to confess only to partially confess, to hold back the full measure of their sin and torment? What's the point? How am I to give absolution for an incomplete repentance? He states the obvious, but doubts it will penetrate this man's disturbed psyche.

"Then may God have mercy on your tormented soul," the priest prays solemnly, defeated.

"On all our souls, Father. On all of our souls."

The holy man evokes a blessing designed to end the confessor's pain, praying that he will recognize and surrender to the loving grace of God, while the man rests his head on folded hands and recites a perfunctory Act of Contrition.

Outside the sanctuary, a dozen young boys and girls play happily in the school playground, unaware that in their midst is this mystery child. Save for the tormented confessor, no one - not the priest, the child or even the Mother Superior herself - knows that the beautiful little girl the Mother Superior so fondly supervises had been kidnapped and secretly hidden there, in Terrebonne Parish Orphanage, for the past twelve years.

One

Mercedes McCormick rests her bouffant-styled red head on the propped up pillow and pulls the flowery-patterned sheet up under her arms. "But why can't we travel together, Lyndie? At least on the same plane, even if it's in separate sections. Nobody knows us in San Francisco, or New Orleans for that matter."

Senator Lynden Chiles, still slightly pie-eyed from a night of bottomless bourbon shooters, sits on the edge of the bed and shakes his head an emphatic no. "We can't chance it, Mercie. Besides, I need you to do somethin' for me, so we can't even be in the airport at the same time."

"What is it this time?" she sighs.

He turns to her. "I need you to go to the gate and wait for the boarding call. The plane will be full and passengers will be asked to give up their seats. You give up yours."

"Give up my seat? Why in hell would I do that?"

"Just listen. There will be a man there who will give you some money for doin' it. Then you high tail it out of the terminal as fast as you can and forget all about it."

"What the hell's goin' on, Lyndie? And why the hell would some guy give me money? Is this the brush off, Lyndie? If so, it's pretty damn elaborate! Why not just say we're over."

"No, no, Darlin'. It's nothin' like that," Lynden tries to assure her, leaning in and giving her a nervous kiss. Then he grips her shoulders firmly. "I just need you to do this for me. It's *vital* that you do this!"

Mercedes sits up straight, seriously concerned. The more distraught Lynden becomes, the thicker his southern drawl comes out. She involuntarily mimics his speech patterns as well, an outcome of so many years of being together, of clandestine meetings and secrets shared about

his political and personal life. *What is it about these politicians?* Mercedes ruminates. *Always a scheme, always lying like a rug. No compunction about anything shady. Certainly no compunction about spinning the truth like a corkscrew.*

But this time she senses something different, dangerous, and she carefully chooses her words and her tone. She touches Lynden's slightly bloated but still handsome face sweetly and coos to him in a manner that always gets him to level with her. "You in some kind of trouble, Sugar? You can tell me."

Lynden rubs his forehead as if to rub the problem out of his mind. It doesn't work. This could be his waterloo if he can't get Mercedes to play ball, and if he dared tell her the truth he might as well put a gun to his head.

"Bigger than you can imagine, Mercie. Bigger than even I ever imagined. I *need* you to do this. I can't trust anyone else to do it. Please!"

Mercedes' radar of self protection triggers alarm bells as loud as Big Ben. "What's this really all about? Is someone tryin' to hurt you? I have a right to know. I could get hurt, too."

"The less you know the better, and you won't get hurt. All I can say is it's about that land deal I told you about," he tells her, dancing around the issue.

"The one the Senate is holdin' a hearin' on in a couple of days? That swamp land someone's tryin' to develop houses on?"

"Yes, but that's not all. I can't say any more, Mercie. Just do this for me? *Please.*"

He grits his teeth so hard Mercedes can hear them crack. She sighs deeply, apprehensive yet resigned to helping out the man to whom she owes a great deal of her

livelihood. "Okay. I'll do it. But when it's over you'd damn well better tell me what's goin' on. Promise?"

"I promise. When it's all over."

Two

It's a record-setting hot and muggy July morning in San Francisco, and the windows of the downtown office building where Michael Warren houses his law practice are propped open to the mid-morning ocean air. Even with a ceiling fan spinning vigorously overhead, the people in the room fan away their discomfort with whatever they can find to move the sultry air about.

They are a group of what Michael once termed "organic types," anachronisms of the 60's dressed in Birkenstock shoes, granny dresses and Indian weave shirts. Michael is an obvious contrast in a smartly-tailored summer suit, sans jacket, and stylish suede moccasins. But, the twenty-something students are passionate, and Michael is confident he will recruit some dedicated activists from this orientation. He goads them masterfully.

"I can't believe you people still dress this way. If you want the movers and shakers of America to support your causes, you've got to look like them, talk like them. You've got to infiltrate their territory, their boutiques and their banks, their country clubs and their Rotary Clubs. You've got to get at them from the inside. Then, they'll think the change in consciousness has sprung from their own brilliant minds.

"Slowly but surely, it will be politically, socially, and morally correct, and, lest we forget, financially advantageous for them to do the right thing. Believe it or not, these self-serving rich bastards would rather let the whole earth shrivel and die unless there was a payoff in it for them. And status, my friends, is the biggest payoff of all."

"Excuse me, Mr. Warren, but I seem to recall you were one of those self-serving, rich bastards yourself." This

from a hostile, bearded young man with a cynical smirk. There is sparse, embarrassed laughter among the group.

Michael smiles with them, having heard this accusation more than once before, and with less political correctness. "Don't judge a man by the company he used to keep. My point is, you don't have to be like them, just let them think you are."

"Why should we be phony like them, or vain and pretentious about our looks like they are?" the hostile one presses on. "We have a mission far more socially important."

A young woman, tired from sitting and wet with perspiration, stretches her arms up and back to reveal an unshaved armpit.

Michael hammers back. "Believe it or not, you can be socially conscious and still take a bath. People today are turned off by the great unwashed. Nobody's asking you to dress like a Vogue model, but we have to change the image of the activist movement if we are to transcend class boundaries, close the generation gap and bring the majority over to our side. Déclassé and eco-terrorism are out. Finesse is in."

He holds up a sheet of paper. "Sign up, if you're inclined to follow our lead; leave now, no questions asked, if you're not. We meet every week, same time for briefings. Hope to see you hop on board."

A scattering of applause follows Michael as he exits the meeting room and hurries next door to his office. Hastily he stuffs a stack of reports in his briefcase and snaps it shut.

Michael's colleague, Al Jergens, glances nervously at his watch. "What time does your plane leave, Mike?"

"About five minutes ago." Michael slips his jacket on, despite the muggy air.

"You're scheduled to testify at 9am tomorrow," Jergens reminds him for the tenth time that day. "You can't miss this plane."

"Stop worrying. I'll make it. I'm taking the Red Eye to D.C. from New Orleans."

Jergens is right on Michael's tail as he rushes toward the elevator. "New Orleans! Why the hell are you stopping there? Get a direct flight to D.C. And get a good night's sleep for a change. I need you totally focused for that Senate hearing."

"I'll be running on fire and brimstone, my favorite fuel." Michael steps into the elevator.

"For God's sake, be on time," Jergens admonishes him as the doors close. "Call me! Shit." The phone rings insistently and Jergens hurries back to the office, his lithe athletic movements getting him there just before the last ring. He slams the door and a small crack in the glass snakes its way up a bit farther on the pane that displays the company logo:

Michael Warren & Associates
Attorneys At Law
Environmental Lobbyists.

Michael stands impatiently in the airport check-in line, behind a very obnoxious woman who interrogates the ever-patient ticket agent.

"I'd like to know what kind of cargo you're carrying. Any drugs, chemicals, or explosives?" she demands with tight, thin lips.

"I'm sorry, I can't give out that kind of information," the ticket agent replies. Ever since 9/11 everybody's a CIA agent, she muses.

Now more indignant, the woman-from-Hell draws herself up to her full six feet. "Young lady, may I remind you of the Passenger Freedom of Information Act?"

The ticket agent rolls her almond-shaped eyes. "I never heard of it, but..."

"I'd like to know if you have any of the following on this flight: foreign or American diplomats, Arabs or Israeli's, Iranians..."

Unable to restrain himself, Michael whispers to her, "A member of the President's security team is seated in first class, with an emissary for the Saudi Royal family."

In a huff, the woman grabs her ticket from the agent and strides off, no doubt to complain to the president of the airline. Michael moves up in line, and he and the ticket agent burst out laughing simultaneously.

In the locker area across from the boarding gate, Gerhardt Schmidt, a stocky, stern-looking man with a buzz haircut, opens his locker and removes an audiocassette tape. For a split second, Schmidt studies the title on the cassette: "Revelation No. 1," then places it strategically in his carry-on bag and closes the locker door.

Michael's reservation is not, for some incomprehensible reason, in the computer. "I'm sorry, Mr. Warren," the ticket agent says. "It looks like all seats are booked on this flight. In fact, it looks like we overbooked. There's another flight at 8pm."

"That's too late. I've got to get on this flight." Michael leans in to whisper something in the ticket agent's ear so the other passengers in line could not overhear.

Sympathetic, the young woman ponders a moment. "Oh, I see -- well, let me try something." She clicks on the microphone to the loud speaker. "May I have your attention please? All passengers on flight 1632 to New

Orleans. We have an emergency request for a seat assignment. If anyone is willing to give up his or her seat, the airline will give you \$500 in vouchers or first class accommodations on the 8pm flight. Thank you."

"Let's wait and see what happens," the agent encourages him. .

Almost instantly, a woman dressed in what could best be described as Tijuana Technicolor meets flea market tacky, rushes up to the ticket counter.

"That's a deal!" she chimes, as though Monty Hall himself had made the offer. "I'll give you my seat." She thrusts her ticket at the agent who is as dumbfounded at the speedy results as Michael, who stammers his appreciation.

Eyeing Michael's 40-ish good looks and fit physique, Technicolor Tacky Lady replies flirtatiously, "No problem, Honey. Hey, maybe we should both dump this flight and kill some time together."

"Uh - well, another time, another place. Maybe."

The ticket agent hands Michael his boarding pass. "You're all set, Mr. Warren. Your seat is 7F. Oh, what a coincidence. That's the same seat on your Red Eye to D.C. tonight."

"Maybe it's an omen," Michael suggests.

Michael's contentment lasts only for the moment, disturbed by an unexpected phone call received by the ticket agent.

"Yes, we're just about ready to roll. What delay? Okay, I'll handle it." Unfazed, the agent clicks on the microphone again. "May I have your attention, please? All passengers on flight 1632 to New Orleans. There will be a slight delay while we finish servicing the plane. Seems someone forgot the dinner trays. Should only take about

20 minutes. Sorry for the inconvenience.”

“Damn.”

Michael finds a seat and flops in it. He starts to light a cigarette, but when the man seated next to him begins coughing his lungs out Michael changes his mind and throws the cigarette away. Taking a second glance at the man’s gray face and nicotine stained hands Michael tosses the entire pack away.

Standing by the locker area out of Michael’s view, Technicolor Tacky Lady -- who in actuality is Mercedes McCormick -- purses her lips happily as Gerhard Schmidt hands her five one hundred-dollar bills. “Ooh! This sure is my lucky day. Who is this guy anyway?”

“Now you just forget all about this little transaction, hear?” Schmidt chides her in a silky drawl that belies his gruff appearance.

Mercedes’ eyes twinkle mischievously. “What transaction, honey?” She stuffs the bills into her purse and sashays away, unaware that her prearranged meeting with Gerhard Schmidt is only a prelude to the intrigue that awaits her as a major player in Michael Warren’s life.

Three

On board the 757 that will soon transport Michael to New Orleans, the attendants are readying the plane for flight. A service worker moves decisively up the aisle placing a complimentary set of head phones in each of the seat pockets. He stops at seat 7F and pulls off one of the ear pads, places a small device inside, replaces the pad, reseals the packet, then tucks the head phones in the seat pocket.

The service worker, a young Cajun named Paulie Dupree, knew exactly who would be sitting in seat 7F, if Gerhardt Schmidt was as good as he said he was. The passenger manifesto had been easily hacked into and Schmidt had a plan to put Michael Warren in that seat, right next to him. For Schmidt, proximity to Michael would enable him to pass along the "smoking gun" that would disrupt Michael Warren's entire life, and then destroy the lives of the people who robbed Warren of the one thing he treasured above all else.

But Paulie Dupree didn't know what Schmidt was really up to, or why he was even on the same flight. It wasn't Schmidt who hired Dupree to rig the headset. He was just a liaison for the main man, whoever that was. Dupree had no idea who had hired him or why. But the money was good, and its source undetectable. Paulie Dupree didn't care what part Schmidt did or didn't play in the entire scenario, nor did he ever suspect that the man would make a fateful decision that would cost him his life.

Michael crumbles up the food wrappers from his vending machine snacks and tosses them in the trash when he hears his name being paged on the loud speaker. He picks up the nearest courtesy phone. "Al? My cell? Guess it's buried in my overnighter. No, the flight was delayed a

few minutes. What's up?"

"I just got a very strange call, Mike," Jergens says. "Some informant wants to give you some valuable information before tomorrow's hearing."

"What informant? What kind of information?"

"I don't know, but he says it will blow the lid right off the case, in our favor. He'll be on your flight to New Orleans, oddly enough. Expect a stranger to become friendly with you. He'll talk about the travesty of the Indians."

Michael snorts derisively. "What Indians? The Cleveland Indians, for Christ sake?"

"Cute," Jergens retorts. "I don't know what tribe. But I doubt too many people will start a conversation about what the white man did to the red man."

"I gotta go, Al," Michael says, hearing the boarding announcement. "I'll call you when I land, if I meet the Indian man."

Michael shrugs off the conversation, believing Jergens has fallen prey to some crank caller. He is used to them. They have hounded him constantly, ever since he started lobbying for the environment instead of for big industry. Ever since Paradise Springs.

Michael hadn't been to New Orleans since then. He had to escape all the memories, the nightmares, and so he moved to San Francisco. He threw himself into activism, hoping to assuage the guilt he felt for what had happened to all the people, especially the children, who had lived – and died - in Paradise Springs. He became a one-man "green machine," as they dubbed him - ready, willing, and able to expose the violations big business committed against the air, land, and water regulations on residential developments.

Now, as he heads back to his previous city of residence, he recalls the first day he and his family moved to their new home...

It was a crisp spring day six years ago when the moving van rolled into the picturesque new housing development, a sprawling array of upscale custom homes nestled in 538 acres of rolling hills, unspoiled woodlands and meadows carpeted with pink, red, violet, and yellow flowers. The quality of life was enriched by a golf course designed so masterfully it was rated as "one of the best courses in America to tee up." The sign at the entryway welcomed residents and visitors to "Paradise Springs -- a Utopian Concept in Community Living."

Michael's wife, Elaine Warren, a fastidious, high-strung Southern belle, directed the movers through the ornate double doors at the front of the luxurious home.

"Place the Remington on the mantel...for God's sake, be careful...it's very valuable. The grand piano goes in the library in front of the garden doors...no, no, not there...the love seat goes along the *north* wall by the fountain, the sofa belongs in front of the fireplace..."

Happy to leave the movers to Elaine, Michael strolled out the French doors to the garden veranda and perused the acreage surrounding his home, abundant with mature trees as well as newly planted, blossoming shrubbery. He breathed in the fresh air and nodded his head, satisfied, yet somehow uncertain about something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Like a wood sprite, his soon to be six-year-old daughter, Dominique, ran past Michael, followed by her frisky golden retriever puppy, Ralph. The sight of her, his darling daughter, filled him with bliss, leaving no room for uncertain feelings.

Dominique stepped adroitly across the cobblestones and rocks dotting the pond that sparkled in the sunlight just steps from the garden, while Ralph happily slopped in and out of the water chasing the birds and ducks that were still swifter than he was at this point. But in a thicket on the far side of the pond, where Michael and his daughter could not see, a few birds lay dead on top of a mud hole that gurgled with slimy, putrid liquid.

“Don’t go too far, Dominique,” Michael called in his proudly paternal tone. Dominique?”

She ran back as breezily as she went, and reassured him. “I’m here, Daddy.”

Soggy wet, Ralph came running up and jumped up toward Michael, but his outstretched hand held the pup back from soiling his clean, pale blue trousers. Dominique giggled joyously.

“Ralph, you crazy mutt,” Michael admonished the puppy affectionately. “Get down. God, don’t go into the house like that. Elaine will kill both of us.”

He tethered Ralph’s leash to the leg of the sturdy wood table he had built himself, and folded Dominique’s hand in his. “Come on inside, sweetheart. Daddy has to go back to work. You be a good girl and help Mommy unpack.”

“I will, Daddy. I love our new house. I want to live here for the rest of my life.”

“Me, too, sweetie. Me, too.”

Annoyed at him, which was her usual mood these days, Elaine complained, “Must you go back to the office today.”

Michael glanced at Elaine and for an instant time was suspended. Before him stood a still-elegant woman, but the once-soft lips were now taut with scorn, and the lyrical, soothing voice was now shrill with anguish and nervousness. When did she change? And why?

"I must," Michael said shortly.

"Well, please be home for dinner. There's not a soul around here except us."

Michael picked up his briefcase and headed for the door. "You wanted to be the first to move in, if you recall."

"Daddy thought it would be fitting," she reminded him.

Michael took a lingering look at the portrait of the menacing Henry Broussard hanging on the parlor wall, in a very prominent place where he had to look at it every time he set foot in the room. His stomach churned at the thought. "Yes, we must always do what is fitting for Daddy Broussard."

"Oh, stop it, Michael," Elaine snapped. "You're like a pouting child. You stand to make as much money from Paradise Springs as Daddy."

Michael sighed deeply, knowing she was right, resenting himself for it as much as he resented Henry Broussard, and perhaps Elaine herself for being as ambitious as he.

"I'll try not to be late," he said, and left the house, knowing it would be a long night.

Four

The passengers of flight 1632 mill about storing luggage overhead, finding and settling into their seats, and making the boarding process unnecessarily longer. One of them tries to stow a pet carrier under her seat but it's too big and, alas, has to be relegated to the baggage compartment. The pet's owner swallows a tranquilizer, hoping to erase visions of Muffy's demise in transit.

Michael makes his way down the aisle to 7F and discovers an obnoxious young boy in his seat, fiddling with the head phones, which he has unwrapped and starts to put on his head.

"Hey, Sport. Do you mind? You're in my seat."

The flight attendant standing right behind Michael is more authoritarian. "Don't touch those, young man. Please return to your own seat."

The boy sticks his tongue out at them, and scurries off.

Michael removes his jacket and settles in, relieved to finally be on his way. He picks up the head phones, notices they are sticky from the hands of the intrusive brat and decides to switch them to the seat next to him. Michael unwraps the new set and catches the attention of the Flight Attendant in the aisle. "What channel is the news on, Miss?"

"Channel 9, sir."

Just as the pilot begins his pre-flight announcement, Gerhardt Schmidt saunters down the aisle, throws his bag in the overhead and drops forcefully into the seat next to Michael. He wastes no time with his gregarious introduction.

"Ooh, Wee. What a place this San Francisco is. Just plain wild. We got nothing like it in Westwago, I'll tell you. You live here?" Michael nods, indifferent. "Lucky

stiff," Schmidt replies.

"Tell you, though, it was a helluva conference," Schmidt rambles on. "Learned more about American Indian tribal rites in one week than in all my years readin' about it."

Suddenly aware of what Schmidt is saying, Michael puts down the head phones. "Did you say American Indian?"

"Saw this great lecture by Joseph Campbell -- you know -- the mythologist? It was filmed, of course, 'cause Campbell's been dead since '87. But he talked about how the Indians, before they killed a buffalo or a bear, asked its forgiveness then thanked the beast for dying so the tribe could eat. Then they chanted and prayed for the animal to be born again so it could have the honor of being killed again and feed the tribe. Some honor, huh?" Schmidt laughs obnoxiously. "Next time I eat a big juicy cheeseburger, think I oughta say thanks for this big gut of mine?" He guffaws again. "Well, hell. Don't let me go on and on. You can listen right here. Just happen to have it on cassette. Go on, it's an extra. Listen at your leisure. Very interesting, I assure you."

"I'll bet it is," Michael replies, curious that this Indian Man actually appeared just as Jergens said he would, but not really interested in pursuing it at the moment. Michael takes the tape from Schmidt and slips it into his jacket pocket, just so the guy would stop jowling on about it. "Listen, would you excuse me? I've got to go to the John."

"Sure thing," Schmidt says agreeably, and stands to let Michael out. "Hey, mind if I sit in your seat a minute? I want to wave goodbye to Frisco from the window."

"Help yourself. I think I'll be a while. Damn airport food."

Sitting in Michael's seat, Schmidt unplugs the head phones Michael had hooked up and plugs in the set that was in his seat pocket.

In the lavatory, Michael throws water on his face and rinses his mouth. He dries his face and hands with a towel, exits the lavatory and seeks out a flight attendant. "Do you have any Dramamine or something? I seem to be sick to my stomach."

"Sorry, sir. We can't dispense any medicine. But if you're really sick, I believe there's a physician on board."

Unaware that he wears the rigged head phones, Schmidt adjusts the dials on the armrest to bring in a radio station that pleases him. For a few seconds, he is content with what he has found, a compilation of country songs. But when the current selection segues into an announcer's narrative, he switches the channel to a World Music station.

Michael's first thought when introduced to Dr. Celia Stone is of Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. This beautiful woman with a cool, polished look, platinum blonde hair wrapped in a gauzy white turban, her body stunningly swathed in a matching white dress, now gives Michael a full understanding of why John Garfield would commit murder for her. In lieu of that grand gesture, Michael pops a mint in his sour-tasting mouth.

The doctor hands Michael a packet of anti-nausea pills. "I'm sure you'll be fine, Mr. Warren. I wouldn't recommend you eat pizza from any more vending machines, however."

Her Southern accent is slight and only now and then apparent. Mostly her speech is tempered, the product of a European education, Michael surmises.

"Thanks. How much do I owe you?" Michael would

have, at that moment, given her all his worldly goods.

“Oh, nothing at all. But if you should turn worse while you're in New Orleans, here's my card.”

“Dr. Celia Stone. Obstetrician?”

“Don't worry,” she says, amused by his reaction. “The pills won't make you pregnant.”

The primal rhythms of World Music seduce Schmidt and he bobs his head around instinctively. But this selection, too, ends in seconds and, giving up on music, Schmidt pushes the channel button to 9, the news station. He winces at the sound, which is distorted with static. But before he can change the station again, his body convulses violently, and his eyes roll back in his head. Schmidt gasps inaudibly for air, stiffens, then collapses inward, limp, while his eyes remain open and his mouth hangs agape.

After taking the two anti-nausea pills with a cup of water, Michael glides down the aisle back to his seat. Schmidt is slumped against the window, the headphones still attached to his large, square head. At first, Michael thinks the imposing man has dozed off, but his eyes are open in an odd, pained expression. Michael jiggles the man's sturdy shoulder. No response. Has he had a seizure of some kind? Trying to be nonchalant, Michael makes his way back up the aisle to Celia's seat in first class.

In a soft, non-conspicuous voice, Michael says, “Can you come with me, Doctor? Please.”

Celia senses his urgency and obliges, following Michael down the aisle. She sits next to Schmidt and feels his pulse. Confused, Celia looks up at Michael and shakes her head.

Five

Michael checks and rechecks his watch, impatient to leave. For several hours, Michael, Dr. Celia Stone and the pilot of flight 1632 have been detained in the office of the New Orleans District Attorney Madison Bouvier. All the passengers of the flight had been herded into special rooms at the airport to be questioned, except for these three key witnesses.

Bouvier, an urbane thirty-something, is mysterious at times, with an impenetrable veneer. Yet, as he conducts this interrogation, he is incisive, even wry, in his approach. To Michael, Bouvier is an enigma, adept yet amused in some twisted way.

"I'm curious, to say the least, why you didn't turn this flight right around back to San Francisco, Captain," Bouvier probes, in a drawl that is airy on the surface with a menacing undertone.

The Captain is obviously stressed and bemused over the inexplicable death on his flight. "I thought it best to continue on and not further upset the passengers. In fact, we did our best to conceal the fact that he was -- what had happened."

"Yes, a dead body does not exactly fit into the image of flyin' the friendly skies."

"My motive was not that trite, Mr. Bouvier. It was a judgment call."

"Not to mention that no airport *en route* invited you to land with your very inconvenient corpse," Bouvier jousts again. The pilot glares at him silently. "Nice juicy case. I was gettin' a bit bored these days. Now I've got a whole jet airplane to inspect from top to bottom, and three hundred possible suspects."

"Mr. Crawford," Bouvier addresses the special agent

assigned to the case, "make sure we have all the passengers' names, addresses and phone numbers before they leave. We'll send their luggage along as soon as it's been cleared." Crawford nods obediently.

"Captain, you are free to go. But leave a forwarding number, please," Bouvier says. Exhaling a sigh of relief the pilot leaves the room.

Michael stands up, unable to sit in the stiff leather seat any longer. He is cognizant that his suit coat is starting to wrinkle in the humid room and perspiration threatens his shirt, while Bouvier is as crisp as a new one hundred dollar bill. What stands out mostly are Bouvier's grey, soft leather shoes. Michael recognizes the artfully embossed insignia on the instep as his father's signature design, but he is doubtful Bouvier could afford the originals on a public servant's salary. Michael muses that they must be knock offs, but very good ones indeed.

"Listen, is it all right if I leave? I've given my statement and I have some urgent business in New Orleans before I catch the Red Eye to D.C."

"And what kind of urgent business would that be, Mr. Warren?"

"It's - it's rather personal."

Bouvier gives a sidelong glance toward Celia. "Doctor appointment? A house call, perhaps?"

Celia Stone jerks her head toward Bouvier, bristling at the crude remark. "I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, for Christ - no, nothing like that," Michael counters, more exasperated than angry.

"Well, what else could be so pressin'?" Bouvier presses on.

"I'd rather not say."

"Well, considering a dead man was sitting in your seat

on the plane and you were the last one to converse with him before he died, I think you're obliged to *say*," Bouvier snaps, emphasizing the last word.

With rising indignation, Michael reluctantly approaches the district attorney and leans over to whisper something into his ear. Bouvier peers straight into Michael's eyes, then reacts without hesitation or emotion.

"Mr. Crawford, see that Mr. Warren has a personal escort, such as yourself, for his very personal business. And be sure he makes it back in time to catch the Red Eye to Washington."

"It'll be my pleasure." Always genteel, obviously sincere, Crawford nods to Michael.

"Thanks. I appreciate it." Michael opens the door to leave, then stops briefly to acknowledge Celia. "Goodbye, Doctor. Sorry we couldn't meet under more pleasant circumstances."

"Perhaps we'll meet again, Mr. Warren," she suggests casually.

Michael smiles at her, hoping for some serendipitous circumstance that would indeed cause them to meet again, then exits the office with agent Crawford protectively on his heels.

Bouvier leans back in his very comfortable chair, and swivels idly. When he is certain that no one is outside the office door to hear, he speaks curtly to the only remaining witness.

"Well, now. Ain't this a kettle of crawfish, Miss Celia? You being on the same flight and all."

With long, graceful fingers and a smooth gesture, Celia removes a jade encrusted gold cigarette case from her designer purse and takes out a menthol cigarette, a foreign brand.

"Just a strange coincidence. I was coming back from a medical conference." Celia hands Bouvier her matching gold and jade lighter.

"Yes, Coincidence. Lucky for Michael Warren he left his seat when he did. But not so lucky for the dead man, was it?" Madison probes. "Did he and Warren have some kind of personal connection?"

"I don't know whether he did or didn't," Celia says, shrugging indifferently.

"Really, now. Well, you'd best find out, hadn't you?" Bouvier flicks the lighter and Celia moves toward it, lightly holding Bouvier's hand to steady the flame as it ignites the end of her cigarette.

Six

Michael sits uneasily in Deputy Crawford's car as they cruise up Canal Street and onto the I-10 freeway. He leans forward and gives the agent a directive. "Exit here, it's just up the next block."

"Why, there's nothin' up Camelia Drive but a big ole -- "
"Here it is. Turn right at the corner."
"-- cemetery."

With a large bouquet of flowers nestled in his arms, Michael exits the car and walks a few yards across the lawn to a well-maintained burial plot. Crawford dutifully follows, but stands back a respectful distance. He had thought the flowers were for an old flame Michael was calling upon, or perhaps for Michael's mother who perchance now resides in a New Orleans nursing home. But his romantic imagination never envisioned this.

An eternal flame burns at a gravesite that is guarded over by an alabaster white cherub. Michael places the bouquet on the grave and studies the tombstone inscription:

Dominique Warren

An Angel Sent to Earth July 15, 1993

Received Back into God's Loving Arms November 12, 1999

"Happy birthday, sweetness," Michael speaks gently. "Sorry I'm late. I guess I haven't changed much, have I?" Among Michael's many unforgiving, guilty memories is Dominique's last birthday before she died...

When he arrived home that evening, gift in hand, the remnants of an elaborate birthday party held in the ornate dining room for his daughter were evident. But the room was devoid of guests as well as the laughter that should have filled it.

Elaine was tidying up, gathering torn wrapping paper and discarded party hats, and placing them in a large plastic trash bag. She was weary and annoyed at the sight of her husband, and each party favor was stuffed aggressively into the bag, symbolically hitting Michael where it hurt.

"All the guests have been gone for hours," Elaine said with restrained ire.

"Where's Dominique."

"In her room. She cried herself to sleep."

"I'm sorry," Michael said, ashamed to even say those words.

"Aren't you always?"

Michael left Elaine to her task and climbed the expansive living room staircase two steps at a time, present in hand. Dominique's bedroom door was ajar and he entered quietly. He placed the birthday gift, a long-coveted antique doll in a box artfully wrapped with streaming multi-colored ribbons, at the foot of her bed. Gently, trying not to wake her but hoping he would, Michael sat on the bed and leaned over to kiss his daughter's forehead. Dominique's flawless face and bronze-gold hair were illuminated by the pale pink night-light. She stirred, feeling her father's presence, opened her eyes and rubbed the sleep away.

"Hi, Daddy."

"Happy birthday, sweetness. I'm sorry I'm late."

"Me, too."

His daughter's innocent honesty cut at his heart like a knife. If he could he would twist it in deeper himself. "I guess I'm always saying I'm sorry to you."

"And I always forgive you." She sat up to hug him, and Michael held her fiercely.

His throat choked up with emotion. "I hope you always will. I need so much forgiveness."

"...So much forgiveness." Michael rises slowly and backs away from the grave. He takes a long hard look, reluctant to leave. He turns toward Crawford, whose own head is bowed in empathy, and together they depart in silence.

Seven

In a Senate Hearing Room in Washington, D.C. two long tables face the Senate Committee dais. Seated at one table are land developer Hardin Westwick of New Orleans, a powerful but uncouth man showing the inevitable signs of aging, and his legal team of five powerhouse attorneys, including head counsel Tag Taggart. At the other table, Michael Warren sits alone with a stack of research papers and charts.

"Would you look at the Lone Ranger over there," Westwick sneers derisively, making no attempt to confine his remark to Taggart's ear.

"The one and only Don Quixote of the environmental movement. Only Warren doesn't just tilt at windmills, he mows them down," Taggart adds. "But I have to admire the guy, coming here all alone."

"Well, do it on your own dime," Westwick growls. "Just remember whose ass is on the line here today. And it ain't just mine."

At 9 o'clock a.m. sharp, Committee Chairman Senator Jeffrey Trebeck of Tennessee strikes his gavel for the start of the hearing. Senators Edwin Hoffman of Minnesota, David Levine of Connecticut, and Lynden Chiles of Louisiana, settle into their seats.

"This committee today will hear testimony both pro and con as to the re-development of Venus Canal," Trebeck explains, "deemed an environmental disaster area three years ago. Looking to redevelop the area is Mr. Hardin Westwick of Westwind Development. Mr. Westwick, you have a rather elaborate display set up here. Why don't you start off the hearing with a demonstration of your plans?"

In front of the committee is a scaled down model of Westwind Community with an electronic control panel that

activates various devices on the meticulously replicated layout. Westwick stands ready to push buttons as he makes his pitch.

"Thank you, Senator Trebeck. And greetings to your respected colleagues, Senator Hoffman, Senator Chiles, Senator Levine. This scaled-down model of my proposed Westwind Community will bring the future into today. By design, it will create 2,000 new jobs and housing for 5,000 people.

"It will be complete with its own mass transit system (he activates the model trains and trolleys which circulate through the model city on recessed tracks); a lake with a fully-equipped boat harbor (he activates the model boats and yachts that skim smoothly across the faux lake); schools, churches (bells ring), restaurants and shopping malls (the neon signs light up) -- a self-sustained community with easy connections to the outside world. Though why anyone would want to leave is beyond me." Westwick's laugh is devoid of humility.

"Very impressive, Mr. Westwick." Senator Hoffman is the first to address the pompous developer. "However, the issue we are all here to decide is, is it habitable?"

Westwick gives him a "*What a stupid question, you Yankee idiot*" expression.

To save his client's ass, Taggart moves to the front of the display and motions for Westwick to sit down and shut up. "I can address that, Senator. I submit these reports from the EPA stating that their \$250 million cleanup effort has been a complete success."

Each member of the panel takes one of the packets. "They have sealed off the leaky dumps," Taggart continues, "scoured toxins from storm sewers and streams and demolished the affected 238 homes nearest the

chemical gravesites. It is completely habitable."

"Bullshit."

All eyes turn toward Michael, who has reviewed the report and tossed it on the table.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Warren," Senator Chiles admonishes him. "This is a Senate hearing and a little respect is due here."

"With all due respect, Senator, Mr. Taggart's so-called EPA report is bullshit."

"Are you intimating," Senator Trebeck asks in his usual cool manner, "that the EPA is inept, or that this report is somehow suspect?"

"I choose Door Number Two."

"Pretty serious accusations, even from you, Mr. Warren. What proof do you have?"

"Senators, Mr. Warren is just grandstanding as usual," Taggart condescends. "He has no proof. It's just a play for more time, a diversionary tactic to delay the committee's approval of Westwind."

Michael stands up to his full, commanding six-foot-two and hands out his own documents. "I submit these photos taken by acclaimed environmental photographer Jonathan Biderman. Those little men in space suits are drilling holes in the ground testing for dioxin, which was found to still exist in the soil adjacent to Venus Canal -- right under that little playground site on your motorized dog and pony show, Mr. Westwick."

Michael flicks one of the model swings with his finger and it spins around a few revolutions. He passes around a new set of pictures. "These photos show waste disposal workers dumping medical waste into a well-concealed incinerator, which will be conveniently buried at the bottom of Westwind's pristine lake." Michael tosses a small

object into the fake lake and watches it sink.

"What a pack of fucking lies!"

Taggart tries to hold Westwick down, in an almost comic dance of opposing wills. "Senator, my client and I object to this high drama. We request permission to see these photos and have them examined by our lab for authenticity."

"Yes, how do we know these photos are bonafide, Mr. Warren?" Levine asks. "Who is this Mr. Biderman and how much was he paid for these photos?"

"Examine all you like, gentlemen," Michael challenges. "Mr. Biderman is a respected photographer, formerly of the EPA. He was paid only for the cost of reprinting these pictures, plus all of these taken over a period of the past three years."

Michael carries a 24-inch high stack of photos and voluminous reports to the dais and places them in front of the Committee Chairman. "I also submit Mr. Biderman's statement and reports from chemical engineers and health department workers who volunteered their time to test samples of soil, water, and plant life from the area over the past year."

By now, Westwick is going ballistic, his face a purplish hue. "Maybe you should investigate yourself, Warren! Why didn't you take samples at Paradise Springs -- from the pond in your own back yard before it killed your own daughter?"

Michael moves toward Westwick with menace in his heart, but is restrained by Taggart who now has to play referee to two hotheads. Senator Trebeck gavels several times for order. Michael and Westwick return to their seats, fuming vehemently.

"Mr. Warren, why should we believe these renegade

reports over the EPA reports submitted by Westwind Development?" Levine wants to know.

"Because, Senator, the EPA report is true as far as it goes," Michael answers decisively, "but it only pertains to the ten-square block area that was originally contaminated. Westwind will cover that area, plus miles of land that was never inhabited and never checked for contaminants, until now."

"You're accusing Mr. Westwick of trying to pull a fast one on us, Mr. Warren. Let's hope you're not trying to pull an even faster one."

"Gentlemen, we will need time to scrutinize these reports," Trebeck interjects, retaking control. "We'll convene one week from today." The loud strike of his gavel adjourns the hearing.

Westwick seethes at Michael under his breath. "You son of a bitch. You turncoat son of a bitch."

Eight

After taking a lingering hot shower and eating a room service lunch, Michael settles into his D.C. hotel room by unpacking a few things. On the phone with Jergens, he roots around idly through the personal items in his overnighter.

"Looks like it's in the bag, Al. The reports, the photos, they were dynamite. I think Westwind will sink into its own stinking sink hole."

He listens to Jergens talk a moment while he leans back onto the oversized bed pillows. "What information? Oh, you mean from that so-called informant on the plane? Yeah, can you believe it? He did give me some cassette tape before he -- Christ, I haven't even listened to it. Obviously I didn't need it. But I will and let you know. Okay, see you tomorrow."

Michael picks up the small, framed photograph of Dominique, which he always carries with him. "Another battle won today for you, sweetness. We might just win this war." Weary after not having slept for 36 hours, Michael reclines on the bed, closes his eyes and remembers...

That horrible day, six years ago, began as a lovely summer morning and ended as a nightmare. Michael was outside doing some carpentry, a favorite hobby, putting finishing touches on a beautifully-crafted game table. He had inherited the joy of working with his hands to create something beautiful, from his father, Jourdan, who had been a cobbler in Russia. When Jourdan moved to the States he changed his name from Werner to Warren to sound less ethnic, and became a talented shoe designer with a recognized and elite brand. For Michael, furniture making was his choice, creating something strong and

powerful, yet intimate and unique.

Dominique was playing fetch with Ralph. A few quail flew overhead and Ralph chased them into the pond. Dominique joined in the chase, paddling her raft across the water in pursuit of the aspiring bird dog, a game they played almost ritualistically each day.

On the other side of the pond, Ralph moved skillfully through the grass and came upon the coveted birds that landed near a gaping, gurgling mud hole. The decaying carcasses of other birds lay around it. Ralph stealthily approached, lunged at his prey then suddenly began to sink deep into the hole. He paddled wildly and yelped frantically, sinking deeper into the sludge.

Dominique screamed and grabbed for him. She, too, was sinking, but struggling valiantly to save her beloved companion.

Having heard her screams, Michael rushed across the pond in time to pull a coughing, sputtering Dominique and Ralph to safety. He held his daughter tightly, protectively, as they both sobbed with fright and relief.

In the days that followed, Michael and Elaine feared that the frightening episode had escalated into something more ominous for Dominique.

"Her temperature is 104," Elaine reported, shaking down the thermometer. "We'd better call the doctor again. I don't understand it. She's had these fevers on and off for weeks now. It can't just be the flu."

"I want her checked inside and out this time. Let's get her to the hospital."

"Daddy, I don't want to go to the hospital. Ralph is sick, too. He needs me."

"Ralph will understand," Michael said as he wrapped Dominique in a blanket. "He wants you to get better, too."

And Mommy and I will take real good care of Ralph."

"Can I say goodbye, first?"

"Okay, but only for a minute."

Michael lifted Dominique out of bed and Elaine tucked the blanket tighter around her. He carried her downstairs while Elaine called ahead to the hospital. Ralph was asleep by the fireplace, but awoke at the sound of footsteps. The dog struggled to get up on his legs so that he could nuzzle his much-loved Dominique. But, suddenly, he wretched, convulsed and collapsed.

Dominique screamed. Elaine rushed into the family room, and gathered Dominique up in her arms while Michael examined the dog.

"My god, he's dead!" Michael was sick with fear and shock.

Dominique screamed again hysterically, while Elaine tried to hush her and comfort her.

Near hysteria herself, Elaine cried, "Michael, what's happening here? What's happening here...?"

Michael shakes the painful memory out of his head, forces himself up and walks over to the desk. He loads the audio tape, bizarrely titled "Revelation No. 1" into his cassette player and turns it on. Casually, Michael glances out his hotel room windows at the expansive view of the Potomac River. Not expecting anything unusual from the tape, Michael listens indifferently to the voice of the late, noted mythologist, Joseph Campbell:

"When the bear is killed, there is a ceremony of feeding the bear a piece of its own flesh. And then there will be a ceremony with the bear's skin placed over a rack, as though he were present. That is the power of the animal master, the willingness of the animal to participate in this game. You find among hunting people all over the world a very

intimate, appreciative relationship to the principal food animal. Now when we sit down to a meal, we thank God. These people thanked the animal."

Eerily, Campbell's distinguished voice then changes to the guttural drawl of Gerhardt Schmidt. "...It seems previous cultures were far more civilized when killing even the lowest of species. What a pity we more advanced races have so little respect for the souls of our brethren. What kind of creature, I wonder, would kill a little child? Allow her to die an agonizing death from a poisoned earth that he himself helped to develop? In a virtual utopia called, ironically, Paradise Springs?"

Michael turns sharply from the window, his full attention now on the recording.

"...and the real tragedy is that the child was not even yours, Mr. Warren. Not the child you and Elaine created and called Dominique. No, this child, the one you raised as your own, was the product of a very evil union between a ruthless man and his young mistress, a girl of pure blood and impeccable breeding. This is the key to this heinous mystery, Mr. Warren, and a clue to the whereabouts of your real child."

The tape stops abruptly as it runs out. Michael frantically flips it over to see if anything is on the other side. Nothing. He rushes to the phone and snatches the receiver off the cradle.

"Operator. Get me the airlines right away. ANY airline! I want the next flight out to New Orleans."

end of sample

