

# MICHAEL GRUBER

*Author of Tropic of Night*



# Valley of Bones

A  
NOVEL



# VALLEY OF BONES

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**MICHAEL GRUBER**

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There are four evidences of divine mercy here below. The favors of God to beings capable of contemplation (these states exist and form part of their experience as creatures). The radiance of these beings, and their compassion, which is the divine compassion in them. The beauty of the world. The fourth evidence is the complete absence of mercy here below.

—SIMONE WEIL, *GRAVITY AND GRACE*

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley, which was full of bones.

—EZEKIEL, 37:1



Blood of Christ, Society of  
Nursing Sisters  
of the (SBC)

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Founded by Bd. Marie-Ange de Berville in 1895, the Nursing Sisters of the Blood of Christ are dedicated to giving succor and providing healing to the innocent victims of war and oppression. The order, which was one of the few to retain the habit after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, is noted for its almost military discipline and its custom of recruiting very young girls from the ranks of abandoned and disabled children throughout the world, although this aspect of its work has been widely criticized. Sisters of the order have distinguished themselves by their bravery and self-sacrifice during both world wars and thereafter in many fields of strife. Although counting no more than three thousand professed sisters and oblates at the present time, it has lost to death over 120 of its number, more than any other order in modern times. Traditionally, its members categorically refuse to leave patients and communities for which they have taken responsibility, in keeping with the order's motto "Where we go, we remain." *See also* Bd. Marie-Ange de Berville; Pope Pius XI; Cardinal Matteo Ratti.

—ENCYCLOPEDIA CATHOLICA, 2D ED., 1953





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**THE COP HAPPENED** to look up at just the right instant or he would have missed it, not the actual impalement, but the fall itself. It took him a disorienting second to realize what he was seeing, the swelling black mass against the white stone and glass of the hotel facade, and then it was finished, with a sound that he knew he would carry to his grave.

After that, he took a minute or so to sit on the bumper of his car with his head down low, so as not to pollute the crime scene with his own vomit, and then reported the event on his radio. He called it in as a 31, which was the Miami PD code for a homicide, although it could have been an accident or a jumper. But it *felt* like a homicide, for reasons the cop could not then explain. While he waited for the sirens, he looked up at the row of balconies that made up the face of the Trianon Hotel. The thought briefly crossed his mind that he ought to go and check the guy out to make sure that he was actually dead, that perhaps the wrought iron fleur-de-lis spearheads protruding from the man's neck, chest, and groin had missed all the vital organs in their paths.

He was a dutiful officer, but this was his first fresh corpse, and he decided not to investigate more closely than a couple of yards, telling himself that it was better not to contaminate the crime scene. The corpse had been a good-looking guy, he thought, leather-dark skin but aquiline features: hooked nose, thin lips, a little spade beard. There was something foreign about the face, although the officer could not have said what it was.

Turning away from it with some relief, he inspected the facade of the hotel, noting that there were three vertical columns of balconies adorning the twelve floors of the building, which was capped by a copper roof styled after a French château. That was the theme of the Trianon Hotel, as much French as would fit: besides the roof, there were gilt cornices, coats of arms, New Orleans-style wrought iron on the balconies, and, of course, fleurs-de-lis on the iron fence that surrounded the south face of the property. People were coming out of the hotel now, frightened men in the hotel's white livery, a few guests from the lobby. A woman's shriek recalled the cop to his duty, and he herded them all back into the cool interior.

A broad man in a double-breasted cream suit accosted him at this point and announced himself as the manager. He knew who it was, a guest, 10 D, and gave a name. The cop wrote it down in his notebook. The manager departed, dabbing at his mouth with a handkerchief, and the cop resumed his study of the facade, although his eye kept drifting over to the victim. The flies arrived and got to their buzzing tasks, and shortly after that an ambulance pulled up. The paramedics emerged, took in the scene, declared the man officially dead, made wiseass paramedic remarks, and went back to their bus to wait in the cool of the AC. The crime scene van arrived, and the CSUs started to assemble their various implements of investigation and their cameras, while making some of the same cracks (that's what I call piercings; sorry, he can't come to the phone right now) that the paramedics had made, and after a little while an unmarked white Chevy pulled up, and out of it came a neatly built, caramel-colored man, in a beautifully cut gray-green silk and linen suit. The cop sighed. Of course it had to be him.

“Morales?” asked the man. The cop nodded, and the man held out his hand to be shaken, saying, “Paz.”

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“Uh-huh,” said Morales. He knew who Jimmy Paz was, as did everyone on the Miami PD, as did everyone in Metropolitan Dade County who owned a television. Morales had not, however, met him professionally until now. Both men were first-generation Cuban immigrant stock, but the patrolman considered himself white, like 98 percent of the Cuban migration to America, and Paz was not white, yet also undeniably Cuban. It was disconcerting, even without the tug of racism, which Morales was conscious of trying to resist.

“You’re the first response on this?” Paz was not looking at the corpse. He was looking at Morales, with a pleasant smile on his face and little lights glinting in his hazel eyes. He was looking at a man in his early twenties, with a fine-featured beardless face, in the complexion usually called olive but which is more like parchment, a face that might be choirboy open when relaxed but was now guarded, tense, the intelligent dark eyes focused on the detective so hard they almost squinted.

“No, I was here already. Somebody called in a disturbance at the hotel. It was a hoax call. I was just about to pull out when he came down.”

“You saw him drop?”

“Yeah.”

Paz looked up at the face of the hotel and saw what Morales had seen. It was perfectly clear from which balcony the victim had begun his fatal descent. All the balconies but one had their glass doors closed against the afternoon heat. In the single exception the door was open and the white curtains were flapping like flags. Paz counted silently.

“It looks like the tenth floor,” he said. Now for the first time he inspected the corpse. “Nice shoes,” he said. “Lorenzo Banfi’s. Nice suit too. A dresser. Tell me, why did you call it in as a homicide?”

“He didn’t yell on the way down,” said Morales, surprising himself with this statement. Paz grinned at him, a catlike grin, and Morales felt his own face breaking into a smile. “Very good. Good police work. Guy slips off a terrace, you have to figure he’s going to make some kind of noise on the way down. And now that we know that, this little line of blood dripping under the back of the skull here is more interesting, huh?”

“He could have hit his head on the way down.”

“Against what? You saw it: it’s a straight shot from that balcony to the fence, and he made a perfect three-prong landing. No, he went over with that wound already on his head. He was probably out cold when he landed. Probably a good thing too, considering.” They both looked for a moment at the fly-crawling corpse.

Then Paz said, “I tell you what, Morales. This guy isn’t going anywhere. Why don’t you and me go on up to that room and try to find out what he was doing before he came down?”

“His name’s Jabir Akran al-Muwalid. I got it off the manager. He’s a guest, 10 D.”

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Another big grin from Paz.

“Very good, Morales. Great! Terrific! Thank you. I wasn’t looking forward to going through the guy’s pockets for ID.”

Morales was thinking that maybe the book on Paz was wrong, that he wasn’t an arrogant pain in the ass after all. Morales had been on the force for nine months, and this was the first time a detective had treated him like anything but a useless doughnut-dunker who had probably messed up the crime scene and helped the perp on with his coat. The other funny thing was that the guy didn’t have a partner. All the homicide guys worked in pairs, but apparently not Jimmy Paz.

They picked up a key card from the desk and went up in the elevator, which was, like the lobby, decorated in cream and gold. It even had a little Louis Quinze chair in it, with a brocade seat. As it turned out, they did not need the key card. A rolled towel had been placed on the floor to thwart the automatic-closing feature of the room door. They stepped over it and into the room.

It was a suite, furnished in the same Louis Quinze style as the lobby and the elevator; and they were now in the spacious sitting room thereof. One whole wall was lined with gilt-framed mirrors, and on the opposite side they had a view of the balcony and the French windows that led onto it; the heavy drapes, printed with heraldic ancien régime designs were pulled back, and the filmy white sheers fluttered in the breeze from Biscayne Bay.

Paz started to walk toward this balcony but caught a glimpse of something in the mirror and stopped. There was a woman in the room. She was kneeling on the faux Aubusson, her hands clasped to her breast, eyes wide open, staring. Paz moved into her field of vision, but she didn’t appear to notice him. He observed that she was speaking in a low voice. Praying? He moved closer, at the same time gesturing for Morales to check out the bedroom.

It didn’t sound like prayer, not that Paz was particularly familiar with the sound. She seemed to be talking to someone conversationally, although he could not make out the words. It was much like the one-sided conversations one heard lately on the streets from the people with cell phones. Paz looked carefully: no cell phone. The woman was tall and thin and had the bony good looks of a country-and-western star, a little faded. A C & W singer who’d never really made it, or one that *had* made it and then got ruined by drink and/or shiftless men, living small in a Hialeah motel. A hard face, he might have said, the kind you saw in the tank when the cops had rounded up a bunch of whores, except that there was something transcendent in the expression on her face that didn’t go with the picture. She was dressed in a faded blue T-shirt, very loose and a little soiled, a calf-length brown cotton skirt, and tire-tread sandals. Dusty feet. Her hair was crow black and cut into a boy’s cap from which small lobeless ears emerged, close to the head. No earrings. Her eyes, set deeply within a hedge of thick dark lashes, were (surprisingly, given her hair and complexion) the color of washed blue jeans, against which the pupils looked unusually small, like BBs. Drugged, maybe? That might explain that expression too. She wore neither makeup nor nail polish, and her skin was sallow in the way that indicates a deep tan faded. Against her neck, just above the fabric of her shirt, he could make out a thin leather cord, perhaps attached to some ornament she wore under the T-shirt.

“Excuse me,” said Paz. To his surprise, the woman rolled her eyes back into her head so that only

the whites showed and toppled gently over onto her side. Paz immediately knelt beside her and put his hand to her neck. Her skin was moist and felt unusually hot, but the pulse beating beneath it was strong and regular. A scent came off her, sweat and something gas-station-ish, like oil or gas, and a faint floral note. Paz had handled many floral arrangements in his time and recognized the odor: lilies.

The woman's eyelids fluttered, her eyes opened, she jerked and looked surprised when she saw Paz staring down at her.

"What happened?" she asked. "Who're you?" A rural-sounding voice. *Hur yew.*

"You were kneeling and then you kind of keeled over," Paz said. "I'm Detective Paz, Miami PD. Who are you?"

"Emmylou Dideroff. Is he here?" She sat up and looked around the room.

"He would be Mr. al-Muwalid, yes?"

"Uh-huh." She rose somewhat shakily to her feet, and Paz saw that she was tall indeed, somewhat taller than his own five ten.

"You ought to sit down," he said, "you look a little shaky." She did, on one of the silly uncomfortable-looking French chairs. "You're from the police?" she asked, and when Paz nodded, she said, "Are you here to arrest him?"

"Why would we want to do that, Ms. Dideroff?"

"Oh, he's a murderer," she said. "A criminal. That's why I followed him. I couldn't believe it, walking down the street in Miami, like nothing. He drove into the parking garage and I parked my truck on the drive—where you check in? And I waited in the lobby for him to come by. I wanted to go up to him and look him in the face, I mean to make sure it was really him. And he didn't show up and I thought, Oh darn, he probably came up right from the parking garage."

She met Paz's eyes and said, "Oh my gosh, I fainted again, didn't I?"

"Yes, ma'am. What exactly were you doing before you went out?" In the mirror Paz saw Morales in the doorway of the bedroom. Their eyes met, Morales shrugged and gestured with his thumb at the room behind him, meaning, no one there. With a slight motion of his head, Paz indicated the balcony. Morales slipped along the wall, silently for a cop, and went through the open French windows.

"Oh, talking to Catherine," the woman said. "Anyway, I just took the elevator up to the top floor and found the chambermaid and asked her which was his room, but he wasn't on that floor, and then I just went down floor by floor, talking to the ladies there, until I got to ten and that one knew him right off. So I went to the room and I saw that the door was propped open and...I went in. I guess I shouldn't have, right?"

"Not really. Who's Catherine?"

"Catherine of Siena."



“As in Saint?”

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“Uh-huh. She’s extremely wise in the ways of the world.”

“Was. I thought she was dead.”

The woman gave him a smile. He saw that she was missing two teeth on the right side, but besides that it was a lovely open smile. “Well, yes. But the dead are all around us. It’s the communion of saints. Are you a Catholic?”

“Raised. I’m not much of a churchgoer.” The woman had nothing to say to that.

Throat clearing behind Paz: he turned, and there was Morales with the curtain flapping around him and an excited look on his smooth face. “Ah, Detective, I think you need to see this out here.”

Paz waved him in and walked across the room. They conversed in low voices.

“What’ve you got?” Paz asked.

“I think the murder weapon’s lying out there. Looks like an engine part with...ah, like blood and hair on it. I didn’t touch it or anything.”

“Good. Anything interesting in the bedroom?”

“The vic’s ID. A Sudan passport with a bunch of business cards stuck in it. A wallet with a couple of grand in fresh hundreds. I looked in the top drawer of the dresser. Was that okay?”

“Not really, but we’ll let it slide. The dead have no rights, but we like to wait for crime scene before we touch stuff. Now, why don’t you keep Ms. Dideroff there company while I take a look at your clue.”

“What’s her story?”

“Damned if I know,” said Paz and walked through to the little balcony terrace. He squatted low and peered at the thing. When he was sixteen and poor as dirt, Paz had rebuilt the blown engine on his first car, a ’56 Mercury, and so he knew just what he was looking at. It was a rod, the short, strong, steel forging that connects the piston of an internal combustion engine to the crankshaft, larger than the Merc’s was, maybe from a big diesel. It consisted of a ring designed to grip the crankshaft and a smaller ring that went around a fat pin inside the piston. There was a smear of blood along the side of the large ring and a few curly dark hairs that looked like they could have come off the head of the victim. He leaned closer, balancing like a chimp on the knuckles of one hand. The rod was brand-new, it seemed, and covered with a sheen of oil. Low on the shaft were several almost perfect fingerprints, where someone had gripped it. Well, well.

He stood and looked over the wrought iron railing. He could see the impaled victim, ten stories below, with the CSU swarming around him, photographing and taking samples. Paz wished them well but thought that most of the relevant evidence would be found right up here in 10 D. He pulled out his cell phone, called the CSU team leader on her cell phone, and was amused that he could actually see the person he was cell-calling to. He waved and she waved back and he told her to get up to 10 D with

all speed.

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He went back inside and pulled up a chair so that he was facing Emmylou Dideroff.

“So, Ms. Dideroff—can I call you Emmylou?” She nodded. “Emmylou—what’s your connection to Jabir al-Muwalid? You a friend of his?”

“Oh, no. He was our enemy.”

“ ‘Our’ being...?”

“My tribe. The Peng Dinka. The Monyjang.”

“Uh-huh. And this was because...?”

“Oh, he was responsible for the deaths of hundreds, maybe thousands of people. I don’t mean just in the war. He was the leader of a kind of special death squad.”

“I see. And this was where? Here in Miami?”

Her face underwent a change, as if she had suddenly realized where she was and what was happening. Paz got a stare that could have come from any Overtown chippie. “Excuse me, but what’s going on? Where is he, and why’re you here in his room?”

“He’s dead,” said Paz bluntly. “He went out that window there about twenty minutes ago and impaled himself on a spiked fence.”

A swift intake of breath, a slight widening of the eyes. “Well,” she said, sighing. “God have mercy on his soul,” and then something in a clanging language Paz did not know. He studied the woman’s face. The surprise looked genuine, but then again if she was half the nut she seemed at present there was no telling what sort of unconscious states she could drop into. Paz had somewhat more experience with exotic mental phenomena than the average police detective. An annoying little prickle had begun a couple of inches in from his belt buckle.

“And so, Emmylou...ah, do you know anything about how he came to go out the window?”

“No. I never saw him. I told you, I came here, I found the door open, I came in and waited.”

“And prayed.”

“I saw the apparition. I hadn’t seen her for quite some time and I guess I drifted, you know, a little ways off.” He saw a little color appear on the bar of her high cheekbones. Embarrassment? Or guilt?

“Right. Tell me, do you know what a connecting rod is?”

“Sure. It’s part of an engine. Why?”

“Do you have one? I mean not as part of a car, a separate one. Like a spare part.”

“Not on me. Look, I don’t understand why you’re asking this about conn—”

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“But you do own one.”

She shook her head. “There’s one in the foot well of my truck. I mean Jack Wilson’s truck. Wilson Brothers Marine on South River Drive. I work there. I do their office, and I’m a parts runner when there’s a rush. That’s how I came across the colonel. I was at Shattuck Machine on Southwest First, picking up a remanufactured C rod for a Mermaid Meteor they’re working on. And he was there waiting by a pay phone outside the 7-Eleven across the street. So I followed him back here.”

“Uh-huh. And basically you came up here and waited for him and you had the rod handy and you slugged him with it, hard, and after he went down you dragged him over to that balcony and tossed him over. Is that how it went down, Emmylou?”

Her mouth became a little pink O. She was good, he had to admit, if this was an act. “You think *killed* him?”

“Well, there’s a connecting rod out there with blood and hair on it. It looks like someone whacked Jabir across the head and then tossed him over. And you’re sitting here praying. And you say he was your enemy. And you followed him all the way back from the river. What am I supposed to think?”

She stared at him. He looked into her eyes and felt a little shock: it was like looking into the eyes of two completely different people, one set being the icicles of a stone killer, and the other the sorrowful soft sky blues of the Blessed Virgin in a chapel.

It was only for an instant, and Paz briefly thought that he had imagined it, but he’d felt the sweat pop out on his lip and in the small of his back. Weird shit, he said to himself, with an inward sigh. Weird shit *again*. This, however, passed; routine took over. Paz read Emmylou Dideroff her rights and Morales cuffed her.

The woman seemed to be back in her trance. “She said there would be more afflictions.” She spoke in a soft wondering voice.

“Who was that, Emmylou? Who said?”

“Catherine. This is so strange. You never can tell what He has in store for you. Life is so *interesting* that way. But you know, really, I didn’t kill him. I wanted to, at one time, and it might even have been appropriate then, but not now.”

“Then why did you follow him back here?”

She said, “I wanted to forgive him.”

Paz couldn’t think of anything to say to that. He made a little motion of his head, and Morales led her away.

**THE BOOKING TOOK** some hours, as it always did. While they hung around the complaint room at the state's attorney, Paz chatted with Morales, who turned out to be Tito. Tito and Iago: they share a Cuban moment about their names. A little Spanish thrown in too, although Morales understood a good deal more than he could speak. He was a second-generation immigrant, or *exile*, depending on who in the community you were talking to. In his easy detective manner, Paz was able to find out nearly everything there was to know about Tito Morales, without revealing anything of himself, except for the stuff that was public knowledge. Morales was twenty-three, unmarried, living at home had tried Miami-Dade for a couple of semesters, liked it all right, but wanted something more physical, more adventurous, had thought about the marines, but didn't want to leave his mother, who was ailing. The cops seemed like a good deal. Paz asked him where he wanted to go in the cops, and Morales said that he liked the idea of being a detective. A little conversation about how one got into the detectives. Paz told the story of how he had got in, which was catching a guy from Overtown who'd killed a Japanese tourist, a story that Morales seemed already to know.

It took a while, but two observations finally struck Jimmy Paz with some force: one was that although he was only about ten years older than Morales, the young cop was far more of an American than he himself was. Paz did not ordinarily think of himself as Cuban foremost, but he realized now that this was because he had been unconsciously comparing himself with his own mother and because he spent a good deal of time immersed in the *cubanismo* of her restaurant and milieu. But compared with Morales, he might as well have been wearing a straw hat and leading a donkey and a cart full of sugarcane. The other observation was that he was receiving hero worship, not obnoxiously, but it was clear that the kid was enormously pleased to be having a private conversation with Jimmy Paz, and that he was going to tell all his pals about it, and his mom, and that they in turn would be impressed. And the kid was white. Paz had been on the TV and had been on podiums, having his hand shaken by the mayor and a congressman and the state's attorney for Dade County, but that was all connected with a particular event, or rather with a particular version of the event—the capture of the infamous Voodoo Killer, so called—which version Paz knew to be a fabrication. Paz was the only person in Dade County who knew what the truth was, and he was practiced in not thinking about it at all. Getting this flash of admiration from a patrolman was different somehow, more real. It really seemed to transcend race, which transcendence in Paz's experience was so uncommon as to be hardly a blip on the radar screen of his life. He realized, not entirely with pleasure, that he was moving, in a tiny parochial way, into the realm occupied by the single-named chosen people of his race: Oprah, Tiger, Shaq.

The booking completed, he bid Morales good-bye and went back to homicide, where he ran the name Emmylou Dideroff through the National Crime Information Center. It came up with a blank, which meant the woman had never been convicted of a crime as an adult. How many crimes she'd committed without being convicted the computer did not say. Although Social Security numbers are not supposed to be used for purposes of identification, this rule is now something of a joke, so Paz ran her name through a commercial agency to get a credit file for her and was somewhat surprised to draw a blank again. Same with driver's license records. The woman did not exist on paper, which was impossible, so the name had to be a fake. He had an address, though, of a sort, and he quickly obtained a search warrant.

Before executing it, Paz attended the autopsy of the late Colonel Jabir Akran al-Muwalid, and learned that the victim had indeed been bashed on his occiput by a blunt instrument, which instrument could very well have been a connecting rod. The theory was clinched later that same day by the crime

lab report, which found that the hair and blood on the connecting rod matched that of the victim. Cherry on top? The prints on the rod matched those taken from Emmylou Dideroff.

Whistling a happy tune, Paz took this material down to the interview room at the Miami PD's Fifth Street headquarters, where they had parked the woman. He found her in the company of a female detective. The detective was reading a worn copy of *People*. Emmylou was reading a Bible. Paz was heartened to observe that there was no counsel present. He pulled up a chair across from her and watched her for a moment. She was reading intently, moving her lips. Paz wondered whether she was a poor reader or if this was something to do with prayer.

"Emmylou," he said at last, when it had become clear that she was not going to respond to his presence. She closed the book and regarded him benignly.

"What does *I.X.* stand for?" she asked, pointing to the picture ID that, like everyone in the building, he wore on a chain around his neck.

"Iago Xavier," he replied.

"That's a lovely name. Which saint do you consider your patron?"

"Let's talk about you first, Emmylou," he said. "You're in a lot of trouble." And now he laid out the evidence against her—the blunt instrument, the forensics on it, the autopsy, her presence at the murder scene, the absence of any evidence that anyone else had the opportunity to whack Mr. al-Muwalid across the skull and toss him to his death.

"The thing of it is, we sort of got you on this. I don't know what this guy did to you to get you mad enough to kill him, but you did it, and the only thing you got going for you now is your story. The only story we have now is that you were lying in wait and killed him in cold blood. No signs of a struggle, if you get what I'm driving at. That's a special circumstance."

"I don't understand."

"It's like multiple murder, or murder with extreme cruelty, or murder for hire. It allows them to go for the death penalty. I got to say, when the state's attorney shows what happened to the victim here, what he looked like on that fence, I think the jury will go for it. I mean, it's something to think about. Whereas, if you tell your story, write out your confession, save the state the expense of a trial, that's a whole different situation."

"You mean confess to murdering him?"

"That's what I mean."

"But that would be a lie. I couldn't lie. And it would be under oath, wouldn't it?"

"Yes."

She smiled, and he thought, Why am I feeling bad? She's the killer. She seemed to pick up his discomfort. "I'm really sorry. I just couldn't. I mean, lie like that. Also, it would mean you'd stop looking for the killer, and that wouldn't be right. He might kill someone else—"

~~“Oh, cut it out!” Paz cried, rising and slamming the thick case folder he was holding down on the table, hard, and was glad to see her jump. He stood over her and yelled in her face. “For crying out loud, Emmylou! We’re not talking *lying* here! You killed him, you know you killed him, and I am giving you your one damn chance to keep out of that little room up in Raiford. The needle? Do you want to die?”~~

She seemed to consider this for longer than, in his experience, anybody had ever considered the question. “Do you really think that there’s a possibility that I’ll be executed?” she asked quietly.

“Damn right!” said Paz, trying to get more conviction in his voice than the facts warranted. Florida had only killed one woman in recent years. “They executed Aileen Wuornos, and they’ll do the same to you. You want to kill someone and you don’t feature getting the needle, don’t do it in the state of Florida.”

The woman seemed to consider this proposition. She cleared her throat and said, “I guess I should consider it an honor.”

“What?”

“To be executed unjustly, like Jesus himself. What more could I ask?”

A little jolt of rage flashed through Paz, and then a wave of regret. He really needed his old partner Barlow on this one, Barlow would know how to handle the woman, they’d have a nice chat about the Holy Spirit and the end times or whatever, and then she’d sign a confession. Paz had his doubts about the death penalty, given what he knew about how the cops collected evidence, but he liked that you could wave the flag of death in a murder interrogation. He found it concentrated the minds of the suspects. Unless they were nuts, as in the present case.

“Provided it’s unjust,” said Paz. “And that’s interesting, Emmylou. Most people are afraid of death.” A nod and a murmur. “But you’re not?”

“I’ve been there. It’s not much.”

“So what *are* you afraid of, Emmylou? Help me out here. I can’t threaten you if I don’t know what scares you the most?”

He saw a small smile bend her mouth. “Oh, you know I talk a good game, but I’m not really that brave. I’m a runner and hider. Sneaky. And what I’m afraid of you can’t threaten me with, I don’t think.”

“Try me. What is it?”

“Do you believe in the soul?” This almost in a whisper, her head down. Paz could hear the female detective turn a page in her magazine.

Paz was actually not sure what he believed in this regard, but he thought that the right answer now was yes.

“Then you could say I fear for my soul, I fear being dragged down to hell.”

“The devil’s chasing you, hmm?”

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She raised her head slowly and looked at him. “Not *chasing*, no.”

Their eyes locked. Paz saw the small pupils expand, covering the blue wash of the iris, then expand impossibly to consume the whites the whole face the whole room, he saw the deadly beauty of hell revealed, he felt its pull, the events of his life spun in his head, changing meaning, yes, he was meant for this, the lovely power of it, the moral compass spun like a pinwheel....

Paz stood up violently, knocking the chair backward. At the noise, the other detective glanced up from her magazine, a puzzled look on her round face. He felt nauseated, he was going to puke on the table, lose control of his functions, blackness closed in, red rimmed, he was looking at the suspect down a tunnel, at a face now entirely ordinary.

Post-traumatic stress, he’d read about it, some flashback from all that voodoo stuff, it went with the nightmares, oh yes indeed, triggered by this lunatic woman and the talk of devils, and the whiff of African weirdness he’d experienced earlier.

“Are you all right, Detective?” the woman asked.

“I’m fine,” said Paz. He took out a pocket handkerchief and wiped his face. He made himself look at her. She was back in Blessed Virgin mode. “So you’re worried about your soul—well, I always heard that confession was good for the soul.”

“Yes, that’s true.” She emitted a deep sigh. “All right.”

“All right what?”

“I’ll confess.”

“Good. You make a full confession and the state’s attorney is a lot more flexible on leniency, or \_\_\_”

“I’m not interested in that,” she said. “I’ve been told to do it.”

“By...?”

“The saint, I told you. I had to forgive and confess.”

“To the murder.”

She shook her head impatiently. “No, I didn’t murder al-Muwalid, I told you that. I mean to my other sins and crimes.”

Paz pushed a legal pad and a ballpoint across to her. She didn’t touch them.

“No, I need a bound notebook, not a spiral, nothing I can tear pages out of.”

“Because...?”

“I’ll lie. I’ll write down the truth and then I’ll tear it out. It has to be bound so you can tell if any pages are missing.”

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“Uh-huh. Okay, bound notebooks. Like in grade school? Black with those little white dots?”

A blazing smile that made her look eight. “Yes, perfect. I think I’ll need...say, four.”

“You got ’em. You wouldn’t want to give me a little teaser now about some of these crimes?”

“No. I have to write it. In that kind of notebook.”

A sinking sensation in his gut. A nut, it was clear, and she’d probably work an insanity plea behind it, and all the beautiful evidence he’d collected would be moot. Was she in fact crazy? Paz knew he’d seen something for a second there in the hotel room that wasn’t crazy at all, that icicle woman, but that meant zero in a court of law. Paz didn’t think at all about what had seemed to happen a few moments ago, and except for the drying sweat on his back, he would have believed that it hadn’t happened at all. Some kind of attack, low blood sugar or stress or something, nothing to worry about, nothing compared with this loony getting away with it. In any case, not his business anymore. Paz felt like he’d wasted his whole day.



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