

~ Requiem for Love ~
W A R N I N G: Adult Material. Reader Beware

“What time is it Father?”

The priest glanced at his watch. “Eleven: thirty-three.” He returned the watch to his pocket.

“Twenty-seven minutes?” Rising from my bunk, I smacked my fist into my palm. I paced back and forth in the cell as I had for over two and a half years. Maybe a minute passed. A precious minute. “Twenty-six minutes now to midnight. Twenty-six minutes to live,” I mumbled.

“That gives the Governor twenty-six minutes. It’s happened before. You’ve been closer.”

A laugh caught in my throat. I could manage only a half-smirk.

“Not this time Father, not this time. We both know that. No more appeals. No more stays.”

I paced the cell with the priest sitting on the edge of my bed, bible in hand.

“They’ve shaved off every hair on my body Father. I’m smooth as a cue ball—no! Make that an eight ball. It’s the last shot and they got me all lined up, in the crosshairs for the side pocket.”

“You’ve made your confession, son. You’re prepared. We all must pay the same penalty for sin some day. Each one of us. It’s just a question of when and where.”

The priest reached to take hold of my wrist and squeezed before letting go.

“And *how*? Father. What about *how*? They’re gonna fry me like bacon.”

“It will be quick. They’ve promised that. You’re as ready as anyone could be. Be strong and of good courage for the Lord thy God is with thee, whithersoever thou goest. I say again, be strong and very courageous.”

“I’m only twenty-three Father.” My chuckle halted my pacing. “It’s funny you know. They say ‘live fast, die young and have a good-lookin’ corpse’ but by the time that chair gets thru with me, I think I’ll make ‘em eat those words.” I laughed but my heart wasn’t in it and my hands shook.

The priest stood. “Here, take the Lord’s word in your hand, son. It may help. Please, take it.”

“I’d rather take your hand, Father.”

He took my right hand in both of his. He sat down with me beside me on the edge of the bed.

“Twenty minutes!” called the guard outside my cell.

The priest squeezed my hand between his. Six minutes couldn’t have gone by that fast. The guard must be giving lead time to walk down the Row to the death chamber. Had to be.

“I apologize for sweatin’ like this Father. I can’t help it.”

“It’s all right my son. Is there anything I can do? Any word you want left for anyone, your brother—anyone?”

“Tell her mother for me, will ya—Mrs. Given? Like I told it to ya? Make her understand.”

“Certainly, I will. I’ll tell her. You can count on that. But you told her yourself, didn’t you?”

“I tried but she said I not only had taken her daughter from her, but I’d stolen her spirit from the Lord, on account of we weren’t married yet. She spit in my face and walked out. She wouldn’t listen. Will she be out there, you think? Will you?”

“Yes, both of us.”

“Can I tell it one more time Father. I know ya heard it a million times but—” My voice cracked and it was all I could do to hold back tears.

“Certainly, I’d like to hear it again if it will help,” he said. “I would.”

“And make sure she understands—her mother—understands how it was between us.”

“You know I will. You’ve told her yourself.”

“I know. I know. But she wouldn’t listen. And I guess, I can’t say it enough. I loved her Father. I took Trudy for granted, but I truly loved her with all my heart.”

“Go ahead, tell me again, son—if it will help. I’d like to hear it.”

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I looked away from the priest across the cell to the blank, grey concrete wall and my internal projector turned on as it did every night inside my head, keeping me from sleep. And I saw her—Trudy—Gertrude Ann Given, my late fiancée, the love of my life. Saw her smiling at me, crinkling her nose and busting out with love all over for me, only for me. She was like that with me, only with me. Never held back. She'd lie in bed, with her arms extended, drawing me like a magnet with the whole of her. How lucky had I been? I spoke to the wall.

“She was special Father, really special and too good for me. I, I took her for granted. She, she loved me all out without holding back, despite her mother's disapproval. She wasn't the most beautiful girl—you know, you've seen her—but she had the most beautiful spirit and, I just gotta say it Father, a body that wouldn't quit. I shoulda married her like she wanted. But I was scared, scared I couldn't hack it and I didn't wanna hurt her. Scared she was too good for me, see?

“She was the kind o' girl who complemented me—completed me—in every way. When I'd go too far, get too excited, she'd calm me down. When I was down, she'd pick me up. Always giving of herself for me, see? Like me, she preferred baseball to football, basketball to hockey, whiskey to reefer, beer to whiskey, swing music to jazz and making love with me to anything else. She was perfect for me and I, I—I let her down Father. I shoulda married her before, be—

“Oh. She wasn't exactly the fairest in the land Father, fairest of face, on account o' that childhood accident, but—and forgive me for sayin' this again Father—but in bed she was ... she was—she was always ready and wanting me—willing to please. My pleasure was her pleasure see? She took it for granted we'd get married as soon as I got my degree.

“But with the War I was 2-S, instead of 4-F like now, you know that Father. Holdin' til the semester ended and I graduated. Get my degree and Bingo! I'm 1-A and overseas. I told you that. Mebbe I shoulda been dead already in the War, 'stead of livin' a couple years on Death Row.

“Ahh, but that was my excuse, just an excuse I gave her. I told her, she didn't want to be a war widow or mebbe stuck carin' for a cripple all her life. She said she wouldn't mind. She just wanted to be with me for any time she could, no matter if I was crippled or not. She said she'd always been rejected. No one had loved her, wouldn't look at her cuz of her face and the scars and the burns—from that cooking accident when she was young. You know. You knew her.

“She said she'd always been full of love and kept it bottled up inside and now that she had me—someone to love and someone to love her—she couldn't keep it in any more, bottled up inside her—any more. She said it was just bustin' to get out of her—out of her and at me, see? So she agreed to take that studio apartment just off campus with me the last semester. And we lived there together. You know, I told you. But we were never happier, Father. She was never happier. I swear it. She told me so every day and night. Though sometimes I'd catch her in a down mood when I'd come in and I knew it was cuz we weren't married yet.

“But, as soon as she'd see me, she'd wipe away the tears, and say it was 'nothin' at all—at all.' Say it just like that Father and smile and throw her self around me and we'd make love right then and there, just to prove it to me—that she loved me more than anything and she was all right with it—with our livin' together.

“Oh, she was somethin' else Father. Wasn't she grand? So kind and generous and loving. I could never kill her—never—never in a million years. It's just that I was too scared to commit, is all, but that night before finals week, I give her the ring, see? And then, well, you know the rest.”

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I looked to the priest beside me. He nodded his reassurance. He knew, he understood. He'd heard it all before, many times before. I bobbed my head before facing the blank, concrete wall again, where I saw the portrait of the other one—

“I never shoulda even looked twice at that other one Father—never!

“That other one was a psycho Father. She was the one killed Trudy, not me. So I killed her. I admit it. An eye for an eye Father, and now it's my turn. I deserve it, I guess even though I didn't kill both of 'em—just her—just the psycho. But ... mebbe, maybe I did kill Trudy in a way, though it wasn't me stuck the knife in her back, though mebbe I did in a way. I mean, if-if I hadn't been tempted, if I hadn't entertained the other one, if I hadn't give her a second thought.

“She was beautiful and talented. I told ya she had that Hollywood offer to play in that supporting role to Barbara Stanwyck, opposite Fred MacMurray and Edward G. Robinson—EDWARD G. ROBINSON Father!—and that slut!”

I faced Father and squeezed his hands in mine.

“But we'll be together again, won't we Father—me and Trudy—together again forever?”

“By the grace of God, my son, by the grace of God. He is merciful and faithful to forgive those who confess and repent from the heart, to those who believe and trust in Him. You may rely on that. That is why His Son gave his life for us, so that we might live eternally with Him.”

“So we'll be together then—me and Trudy?”

“You confessed your guilt and are truly sorry for your actions. I believe you are. He knows.”

“I shouldn'ta killed her Father—the psycho. I do feel bad about it, really. She was rotten to the core but that was her problem, not mine, though I let it become mine—”

It all came back to me in living color, like every time I closed my eyes to try to sleep.

“I haven't slept, really slept, since it happened, Father. I open my eyes to stare across the cell at that wall like I'm doin' now and the projector in my head starts rollin' like now—

She taunted me that night with Trudy lying there naked, frozen on her side on the bed bathed in the lone light of the reading lamp in her own blood, her face and body all contorted and twisted from reaching around, trying to pull that bread knife out of her back from where the psycho stabbed her. The knife handle propping her up there, off the mattress at a weird angle. Oh, I can still see it. It was horrible—sickening.

And then I heard that high-pitched cackle coming out of the dark from the corner of our one-room apartment. And I turned the reading lamp on the headboard toward that laugh. And there she was—perfectly made up—her white-blonde hair coiffed to perfection, parted high on one side and the ends rolled underneath, resting on her shoulders. Not a hair out of place. Been there all along in the dark and I didn't even know it. She sat there side-saddle in the corner with her feet together drawn up beside her butt, leanin' back to one side and her arms resting on the round, stuffed arms of the chair, the only decent piece of furniture in the place. She held a closed, gold-plated tube of lipstick in one hand and an over-sized, chartreuse scarf draped over the front of the chair arm from the other. Her perfectly chiseled face as gorgeous as any movie star. Anyone could see why Hollywood would want her. And she was not without talent. Father, she had proved that on the university stage more than once. She was a natural. She could act anything. It was a wonder she hadn't been discovered before.

And she wore not a stitch Father, not a stitch, and she was beautiful, sculpted, alabaster white, she was—yes, like a sculpture of Aphrodite or some goddess. I had

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never seen her like that, refused to ever be in that situation, to see her that way, because I knew what it would do to me—to me and to Trudy. And the psycho could never accept that I wouldn't allow it to happen between us.

She rose out of that chair Father, like a nymph rising from the sea and she began to walk slowly toward me Father, heel-to-toe, with her lead foot slewed to keep her balance, her hips swinging slowly from side to side. She dropped the lipstick case and held the over-sized scarf by opposite corners, dangling it at length before her, shielding herself from me as she came on, twisting it by the ends so that the scarf shrunk up slowly, revealing more and more of her alabaster frame as she came on toward me.

Despite Trudy's cold body laying still behind me, beside me on the bed, her beauty stunned me as she strolled toward me. My heart caught in my throat. She had me.

"I don't know why Darling," she said. "I don't know why it's you. I've had them all—award-winning professors, All-American football heroes, All-Conference wrestlers. There's really quite a list, but none of them were you. No, not a one."

She drew me—lured me—into her eyes and her lips, drawing me up off the bed and I forgot about Trudy lying all twisted and contorted, naked and dead behind me, propped up off the bed with a bloody knife in her back, still reachin' for that bloody knife, see?

"I've got a figure too, don't I?" she said. "Not bad at all, am I?" understating the case by a mile. "Not unlike her, eh?" She grit her teeth, "But unlike her," she added, "I don't have a face like a *pan full of worms!*"

She spit out the last words with a caustic venom. And I kind of lost it. I turned and reached back for the knife and pulled it out of Trudy's back. It slid out easy, and Trudy plopped on her back into her blood on the sheet, still twisted around, reachin' for the knife that wasn't there now. I pivoted on my heel to lunge at the psycho.

But when she waved the scarf in my face like she's waving a white flag, I hesitated Father.

"You want to kill me, don't you?" she toyed. "You get life for one murder," she added, as calmly as if she was discussin' the weather. Then she grinned. "But you get the chair for two."

That stopped me in my tracks. "What are you talking about?" I asked.

"She pointed over my shoulder toward Trudy on the bed.

"One for her—that's life, but two—for me—that's the chair. They'll fry you crispy."

"Ten minutes!" called the guard from the corridor. I paused then picked up again without missing a beat.

"You're crazy," I said. "I didn't kill her, you did and you know it."

"Really?" she said. She took the scarf diagonally by opposite ends in either hand, stretching it out and rolled it up by twisting the ends round and round in her fingers and aimed it at me as if it were a sling shot. "They'll find *your* fingerprints, not mine, on *your* bread knife, not mine," she said curling the corner of her lovely, sick mouth.

She stretched the scarf father back, taut as it would go, and let go so that the end snapped forward striking me in the cheek. And I got it then. She had wiped the knife handle clean with the scarf. Her prints weren't there.

"I loved her," I said. "Everybody knows that. We were engaged—"

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“Who have you told besides me?” she asked. “Just hours ago, you said you had told no one but me. You said you had asked her to wait until graduation to surprise her mother with the news because she wanted to see the look on her mother’s face when she told her. You could all go out to eat as a happy family after graduation you said, and you would surprise her mother and wouldn’t she be happy? That’s what you said.”

“Sure, I said that. But it’s crazy. No one will believe that *I* killed her—never!”

“Why not? We met this evening in the Pub. People saw us there. We sat in a booth and held hands across the table. Everybody saw us but they didn’t hear what we were saying, what you told me about your engagement and you wouldn’t see me any more. You whispered, remember? No one heard. They’ll think you killed her—for me. See?”

“But the ring,” I said. “The engagement ring will prove—”

“Prove what? You bought it cheap, spur of the moment, off a guy on the street—a drifter—who said he needed the cash to blow town because somebody was after him, to hurt him. It was his offer gave you the whole idea. You got a great deal, you said, for fifty bucks you got a five hundred dollar ring. But where’s the ring now?”

“Whaddaya mean? It’s on her finger where I put it tonight.”

Grinning from ear to ear, she shook her head. “Unh-unh Baby, I don’t think so.”

“Sure it is, sure it is. I’ll show ya.”

I dropped the knife to the floor and turned from her to climb over the bed. I rolled Trudy from her back to her belly just to the edge of the bed. I found Trudy’s left hand behind her back reaching toward the knife wound but there was no ring on her finger. I looked on her other hand, reaching back down over her shoulder, but no ring. I looked all around her body on the bloody bed. Frantic, I rose from my knees off the bed, running around, looking all over the place. But the ring was nowhere to be found.

That high-pitched cackle again froze me in my tracks.

“You won’t find it,” she said. “Do you know how silly you look, running around in your drawers, like a chicken with its head cut off?” She laughed.

“Why? What did you do with it? Where’s the ring?”

I took her by the shoulders and squeezed hard. She merely laughed in my face. Then she threw her head back, letting her perfectly-coiffed, white-blond hair drift beneath her shoulders, and rocked with laughter that swelled up from her belly.

I shook her. “Stop it,” I said. “Stop it! *Stop it!*” I shook her so hard her head snapped.

“*What* did you do with the ring?” I demanded.

She stopped cackling. Her eyes took on a strange, hungry look and then she said.

“Do you know how long I’ve waited, how much I’ve wanted and how long I’ve waited for you to look at me this way, with fire and desire in your eyes like this?”

She dropped the scarf and threw her arms about me and kissed me hard and flush on the lips, squeezing me against the soft, full curves of her alabaster flesh. And I responded. God help me, Father. I responded, all right. I couldn’t help myself. Our tongues met and she had me. And I forgot all about bloody Trudy all contorted and fish-eyed in the bed with the bloody murder weapon at our feet and Trudy’s murderess in my mouth and arms.

She shoved me hard, pushing me backward and I fell back sitting on the edge of the bed. We reached for each other and kissed again—hotly. She took hold of my shoulders and twisting me, shoved me back down onto the bed beside Trudy. Before I realized it, the psycho was astride me, straddling me, peeling off my skivvies. In the heat of it all, I

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helped her. She leered at me. We were both panting like dogs with anticipation. Our eyes met and in that instant, I knew she was right, had been right all along. Knew this was what we had both wanted and what I had denied. She threw back her head, tossing her long hair over her shoulder, arching her back to get the full of it with her hands pressing down into my rib cage, when she spied Trudy's backside on the edge of the bed. She leaned forward balancing herself with her hands on my chest to lift her leg as a dog might next to a fire hydrant. She put her left foot into Trudy's rump and kicked poor Trudy out of bed. Trudy's body fell to the floor with a heavy, deafening thud.

"Face like a pan full of worms—over *me*?" She cackled. "NEVER!"

I had seen it all playing out in Technicolor on the grey concrete cell wall, as if it were happening all over again. And unlike then, I caught myself and shuddered. I flipped off the projector in my mind and swiveled my head to face Father again. I felt myself shaking all over, with sweat pouring out of me, squeezing the padre's hands tight between both of mine.

"And that's when it happened, Father," I said sadly, fully resigned to my deed and the fate it had wrought. "I guess I went a bit psycho myself for a minute Father, because I reached up and strangled her. At first, she thought it was fun, a game, a part of rough love-making, squealing that she liked it rough, but when I didn't let up, she became frightened. Her face drained of color and she fought and kicked and bit, but it was no use because I couldn't stop myself and she sure couldn't stop me. I kept hearing those words echoing in my head—*face like a pan full of worms*—echoing in my brain, and I could think of nothin' else but to silence the mouth that uttered them once and for all. She managed to nod toward the casement window and croak—"the ring"—but it was too little, too late Father. And I killed her. Yes, I killed her."

I shook my head in despair.

"Afterwards, I sat on the bed between the two corpses, between two of the loveliest female hourglass bodies the Good Lord ever created, both lying their naked and silent beside me—dead silent. But, the worst of it Father, what keeps me from sleeping at night is the thought that I let that psycho get to me and actually went for her, right there on the bed with Trudy's dead body lying beside us. I-I—"

I sighed. I couldn't speak further. The priest patted my hands, asking me to calm down. After I collected myself, I picked up where I had left off, because I wasn't finished with the telling and he knew I wasn't finished because he had heard the story many times before.

"The psycho called me at home at midnight and lured me out with that story she invented to meet me. She said she was sorry for trying to bust us up—Trudy and me—and she wanted to apologize in person. She said she had to do it in person or she couldn't live with herself. She said she wouldn't be able to sleep at night, if she couldn't see me to tell me.

"Oh—I told ya she was a helluva—pardon me, Father, I mean—a heckuva an actress Father. She shoulda got the Oscar for that phone call performance, the way her voice trembled when she said she couldn't live with herself, if she couldn't see me to tell me in person. The way she sobbed because she said she felt so guilty she couldn't sleep—like me Father—like I been unable to sleep good ever since it happened. She asked to meet me in front of the pub cuz it was closed and it would just be for a minute. Then came the kicker, '*or*,' she said, '*or* I can come over and tell both of you right now,' she said. That was the clincher, Father. That was the clincher.

"So I agreed to meet her in fifteen minutes but she said to make it thirty, cuz she wanted to get her laundry out of the machine in the basement of her dorm and to wait a few minutes if she was

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late. Get her laundry at midnight, when she just *had to meet me*? I shoulda known right then Father, somethin' was up but like a chump—a first-rate chump—I left Trudy fast asleep to meet her and I waited—waited until one, but she never showed. That's cuz she was back at my place knifing Trudy in the back—the psycho! She must've got in with the key we kept over the front door sill, just in case we got locked out. I had told her about it once.”

I shook my head. “What a fool I was ...”

“Then Father, I felt a puff of a breeze and noticed for the first time, the casement window over the bed was open. So I got up and walked on the bed over to it and looked out. Below was the woods and the creek that flowed right next to the apartment house. I could hear it babbling over the rocks. She must have thrown the ring down there. That must have been what she was trying to tell me, when I choked her to death. If they could ever have found that ring, mebbe, maybe—”

“It's time Rocker,” said the guard as he opened the cell door. The priest rose with me.

“His will be done,” said the priest. “He knows, and His will is perfect. You can expect that He will perfect all things that concern you. It's promised in the scripture. Delight yourself in the Lord and He shall give you the desires of your heart, my boy. Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass.”

“Really, Father? For true? He'll put me and Trudy together for always—*for eternity*?”

The guard entered the cell, while three more stood out in the corridor, waiting.

“I have quoted His holy word and He cannot lie. It is against His holy nature to do so. He will work all things to good to those who love and believe in Him. I know that both of you do. So trust in Him. Lean not into your own understanding. Trust in Him to make your path straight.”

“Rocker! It's time,” repeated the guard. He took me by the arm, prying me from the priest.

“Tell Mrs. Given, Father. I loved Trudy, always will. Tell her I'm so sorry for what happened to Trudy. Truly sorry. I'd give anything to bring her back. I wish this here would do it. I do.”

The guard tugged me away out into the corridor. The priest followed behind.

“May God bless you and make his face to shine upon you, my son. May you rest in peace with him and Gertrude Ann for eternity.”

I nodded, as a second guard took me by the other arm and a third guard led the way and a fourth fell in behind me. The guards escorted me down the corridor to meet my fate.

“One last favor Father?” I said over my shoulder to the priest trailing behind us.

“Yes? Anything.”

“Say a requiem mass for us—for me and Trudy, will ya Father? Say a requiem for our love for each other?”

“I will. I promise you I will. I'll say a requiem—for both of you—for your love.”

The guards tugged at my elbows. “Don't make this difficult now,” said the one on my right.

Shaking my head, I said I wouldn't and shuffled along the corridor among them, head down. The lead guard opened the door to the death chamber. I spied the chair over his shoulder.

“I love you Trudy,” I whispered, “I love you. Please forgive me and welcome me, so we can be together as you always wanted. Please, let us be together forever Lord. Thy will be done. Amen.”

* * *

It was 12:20 a.m. The priest was standing outside the prison walls in the raw, night cold, speaking with Mrs. Given, when Rocker's lawyer reached them. The priest and Mrs. Given were dressed for the winter cold, replete with overcoats, hats, scarves and gloves. The lawyer was not. A light snow had begun to fall.

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“Excuse me Father, Mrs. Given,” said the lawyer with his breath forming mist out of his mouth, rubbing his bare hands together and blowing on them for warmth.

“What is it,” asked the priest.

The lawyer was hatless and coatless. He scrunched his shoulders against the winter cold, shifting his weight from one foot to another, blowing on his bare hands.

“I’m glad I caught you two together,” he said. “The warden just notified me.”

“Yes?” replied the priest.

“A kid found the engagement ring in the creek a bit downstream from the apartment house. Been there over two and a half years, I guess. Found it this afternoon. His mother didn’t know what to do with it. She was going to keep it but decided it looked pretty valuable so she took it to the police station late last night. They didn’t think anything of it until the desk sergeant came on for the midnight shift. He was one of the two policemen who responded to the initial scene. The ring fit the description Rocker had given to a “T.” The sergeant put two and two together and phoned the Governor, but it was too late.

“You know with the ring as evidence, I could have made a case for voluntary manslaughter maybe. With time served awaiting trial and good behavior, he might have been paroled in a year or two. Instead ...” He shook his head in silence.

“You can’t be sure of that,” said the priest. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, Counselor. You know the Lord works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform.”

“I don’t understand Father. The boy’s dead. What do you mean by that,” asked the lawyer.

“Well, he paid his penance and, with Gertrude gone, what he wanted most of all was to be with her—for *eternity*—he said. And maybe now he is. Maybe they’re together, in love forever now. What they both wanted. He asked me to say a requiem mass for both of them, for their love of one another. I was just telling Mrs. Given here, I think I can arrange a mass for Friday at three. Would you care to come? Over at Saint Paul’s, down on Liberty just west of the park?”

The lawyer nodded. “I know it,” he said. “Down the street, south of the police station. Sure, I’d like to make it. It’s the least I can do for him. He was a decent kid, really. Wish I could have done more for him.”

They stood in silence for a minute, watching the light-falling snow. The priest looked at the lawyer, who blew harder on his hands, rubbing them together, the blow of his breath rising in mist between them. They both looked to Mrs. Given, who dropped her head.

“Thanks,” said the lawyer. “For telling me that, Father. I would never have thought of it like that. It was kind of you to say it—geeze. It’s colder than a witch’s—well. It’s darn cold out here. I’ll be seeing you—Father, Mrs. Given. See you Friday at three then.”

The priest nodded but Mrs. Given looked away. The lawyer bobbed his head and turned to go but stopped abruptly to face them.

“Oh—Mrs. Given —forgot to mention, the station is holding the ring for you.”

“Why, me?” she said.

“It was your daughter’s engagement ring, ma’am. It belongs with her personal effects and they belong to you. It’s your ring now ma’am.”