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TIFFANY REISZ

The SAINT

THE
ORIGINAL SINNERS
The White Years

"I cannot say enough good things about this book.... [*The Mistress*] brings out the best in her characters, [a] juicy plot, while also giving readers a deeper look into Nora and Søren's complex relationship." —*RT Book Reviews*, a Top Pick GOLD review

The Saint

Tiffany Reisz

Dedicated to St. Ignatius of Loyola, His Holiness Pope Francis and all the soldiers of God who serve
in The Society of Jesus.

“He was part of my dream, of course—but then I was part of his dream, too.”

Through the Looking-Glass

Lewis Carroll

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1

Nora

NORA SUTHERLIN WAS BEING FOLLOWED.

She didn't know she was being followed as she drove through Bavaria and into the heart of the Black Forest. Who would follow her, after all? And why? No one back home knew why she'd left, and no one at all knew where she'd gone. She kept her eyes on the road ahead and didn't once think to look behind her.

A vague uneasiness, a quiet sort of dread, had burrowed into her mind and made a home there. The sun, which had seen almost as much as she had in her lifetime, chased her car as she raced down a road shrouded in towering pine trees. Dark. Light. Dark. Light. Nora sensed the shadows wanted to catch her and keep her. She pushed the accelerator and fled deeper into the forest.

At last she came to the end of the road and spied a small thatched-roof cottage hidden among the pine and fir trees. Two stories and made all of stone, the little house seemed an exile from a fairy tale. A kindly woodcutter could live in that house—the sort who'd save a little girl from the jaws of a wolf. If the cottage were part of a fairy tale, who was she? The woodcutter? The girl?

Or the wolf?

She gathered her things from the car and strode toward the cottage. The owner had warned her there was no lock on the door but promised she would be safe. This part of the woods was on private land. No one would trouble her. No one at all.

Ivy covered the cottage from the ground to the chimney. She felt as if she'd stepped back four hundred years when she crossed the threshold. Gazing around the interior, she made her day's plan. She'd build a fire in that great gray stone hearth. She'd drink tea out of ruddy earthenware mugs. She'd sleep under heavy sheets in a rustic bed with posts of rough-hewn wood. In another time and under different circumstances, she would have loved it here. But grief clawed at her heart, and her tears lay hard before her.

And it wasn't in Nora's nature to relish the prospect of sleeping alone.

She took her bags upstairs to the sole bedroom and knelt on the floor by the smaller of her two suitcases. She unzipped the bag carefully, slowly, reluctantly. From a bed of velvet she pulled out a silver box the size of a pew Bible and held it in her shaking hands.

As the cottage owner had promised, she found the cobblestone path that led to the lakeshore. The smell of pine surrounded her as she wandered down the path. It was April but the scent called Christmas to mind.... "O Holy Night" playing on the piano, red and green candles, silver bows, golden ornaments and Saint Nicholas coming to hide coins in the shoes of all the good little children. Idly she wished Saint Nicholas would see fit to visit her tonight. She'd welcome the company.

The path widened and ahead of her she saw the lake, its dark clear waters silver tipped in the sunlight that peeked through clouds. She stood on the stony shore at the water's edge.

She could do this. For days now she'd been preparing herself for this moment, preparing what she would say and how she would say it. She would be strong. For him, she would do this, could do this.

Nora swallowed hard and took a quick breath.

"Søren ..." As soon as she spoke his name she stopped. She could get no more words out. The words backed up in her throat and choked her like a hand around her neck. Turning her back on the water, she half walked, half ran to the house, the silver box clutched to her chest. She couldn't let it go yet. She couldn't say goodbye.

She set the silver box on the heavy wood fireplace mantel and turned her back to it. If she pretended it wasn't there, maybe she could believe it hadn't happened.

Outside the cottage, the wind picked up. The rickety, ivy-covered shutters rattled against the stone walls. Electricity brushed against her skin. Ozone scented the air. A storm was rising.

Nora started two fires—one in the great stone hearth and one in the smaller bedroom fireplace. The owner of the house had stocked the refrigerator and cabinets for her. An unnecessary kindness. She hadn't had much of an appetite for two weeks now, but she'd make herself eat if only to stave off the headaches hunger inflicted on her.

The day passed as she kept herself busy with small tasks. The cottage was clean but it gave her no sense of purpose to wash all the dishes in a large copper kettle and to sweep the hardwood floor with the witch's broom she found in the pantry. She worked until exhaustion overtook her and she lay down on top of the bed and napped.

Nora woke from a restive, dreamless sleep and ran water in the claw-foot porcelain bathtub. She sank into the heat, hoping it would seep into her skin and relax her. Yet when she emerged an hour later, pink and wrinkled, she still felt tight as a knot.

She dressed in a long white spaghetti-strap nightgown. The hemline tickled her ankles as she walked and brushed the tops of her bare feet. To distract herself, she stood in front of the mirror twisting and pinning her hair this way and that, taming the black waves into a low knot with loose tendrils that flowed over her neck and framed her face. When she finished, she almost laughed at the effect. In her white nightgown, with understated makeup and her hair coiffed in curls, she looked like a virgin bride on her wedding night. An older bride, of course—she'd turned thirty-six last month. But still the woman in the mirror looked demure, innocent, even scared. She thought grief aged people, but tonight she felt like a teenager again—restless and waiting, aching for something she couldn't name but that she knew she needed. But what was it? *Who* was it?

She wandered downstairs and considered eating. Instead of feeding herself, she fed the fire. As the wood crackled and burned, lightning split the sky outside the kitchen window. Thunder rumbled close behind. Nora stood at the window and watched the night rip itself open. Bursts of thunder rattled the forest again and again. Between rumbles, Nora heard a different sound. Louder. Clearer. Closer.

Footsteps on stone.

A knock on the door.

Then silence.

Nora froze. No one should be out here. No one but her. The owner had promised her privacy. The

cottage was the lone house for miles, he'd said. He owned all the land around it. She would be safe. She would be alone.

Another knock.

The cottage door had no lock. Whoever stood outside could walk in at any moment. For two weeks now the only emotions she'd felt were sorrow and grief. Now she felt something else—fear.

But Søren had trained her too well—Hebrews 13:2, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” And such a night was fit for neither angel nor demon, saint or sinner.

She threw open the door. A man, not an angel, stood on the opposite side of the threshold.

“Sanctuary?”

Rain drenched his dark hair and beaded on his leather jacket.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest, self-conscious about the low cut of her nightgown. She should have thrown on a robe.

“Begging for sanctuary. Should I do it again? Sanctuary?”

“Did you follow me?” she asked. She'd flown into Marseille last night and had dinner with him. She'd never dreamed he'd chase her all the way to Germany.

“I would have come sooner, but I took a wrong turn at Hansel and Gretel's. A girl in a red cloak gave me directions, and now I'm here, Snow White.”

“You found your way here, Huntsman. You can find your way back,” she said. “I can't give you sanctuary.”

“Why not?”

“You know what will happen if I let you in.”

“Exactly what we both want to happen.”

“It can't happen—you and me. And you don't need me to tell you why.”

The smile faded from his face.

“You need me,” he said.

“It doesn't matter. I have to do this alone.”

“You don't have to do it alone.” He took an almost imperceptible step forward. The toes of his rain-soaked buff-colored boots touched but did not cross the threshold. “You do too much alone.”

“I can't let you in,” she said, and felt that fist in her throat again.

“Would he want you to face this alone?”

“No,” she said. “He wouldn't.”

“Let me in.”

“That sounded like an order. I told you what I am. You know I give the orders.”

She could already feel her resolve crumbling. Twenty-five years old, tall, deeply tanned, dark hair with the slightest wave to it that demanded a woman's fingers run through it again and again, clear celadon eyes—an inheritance from his Persian mother—and a face that someone should sculpt so it would endure even after both of them turned to dust and ashes ... How could she turn him away? How could anyone?

“Then order me to come inside,” he said.

She closed her eyes and held the door to steady herself. This was wrong. She knew it. She'd sworn before she'd even seen him that she wouldn't do this, not ever, not with him. But then she'd met him. And now, after all that had happened and the grief that threatened to overwhelm her, could anyone blame her for taking her comfort with him? One man would blame her. But was that enough to stop her?

“Order me in,” he said again, and Nora opened her eyes. “Please.”

She could never resist a beautiful man begging.

“Come in, Nico,” she said to Kingsley's son. “That's an order.”

2

Nora

SHE SHUT THE DOOR BEHIND NICO AND PULLED HIM to the fireplace. She helped him out of his jacket and boots. Battered and mud crusted, his shoes looked nothing like Kingsley's spit-shine riding boots. These were work boots, steel tipped and utilitarian.

"Do I want to know how you found me?" she asked as she brushed the mud off Nico's boots and set them to dry by the fireplace.

"I followed your trail of bread crumbs."

"Bread crumbs?"

"You might have accidentally left your bag open at the restaurant and I might have accidentally seen the address on your rental confirmation."

"Leaving my bag open *was* an accident," she said.

"Finding the address might not have been." He pulled off his socks and ran his hands through his hair, shaking the rain out of it.

"Like father, like son." She sighed. "You're as sneaky as Kingsley."

"Are you angry?"

"No, I'm not angry." She raised her hand to her forehead and rubbed at the tension headache lurking there. Nico pulled her hand down and looked at her with concern.

"Need food? Wine?" she asked before he could ask her how she was—a question she didn't want to answer. "Or did you bring your own?"

"There might be a bottle or two of Rosanella in the car."

"I won't make you bring them in," she said. Outside the storm still raged wild.

"I will later. First things first." Nico took her by the wrist and pulled her close.

"Nico ..."

"Don't," he said. "Don't fight me. Let me help you."

Sighing, Nora rested her head against his chest and let him rub the knot of tension in her neck. When they'd met in December she'd had Zach with her, and Nico—only his mother called him Nicholas, he'd said—had shown her editor/friend/occasional lover all due deference. But when she'd visited again a month later, Nico did nothing to hide his delight at having her to himself. He was barely twenty-five. Handsome and young and French, what reason did he have for wanting her—nearly twelve years his senior and with a long history of sleeping with the man he'd learned was his biological father? She got her answer while they were out walking one day. Two women—a mother

and daughter—had stopped them, asking for directions. The mother looked forty years old, the daughter around Nico's age. Both were well-dressed classic French beauties. Nico barely blinked at the daughter. To the mother he'd flashed a smile so flirtatious even his father would have been impressed. Kingsley's son had a fetish for older women.

Well ... how nice.

"You're in pain," he said. "I can feel it all through you."

"I like pain," she reminded him.

"No one likes this kind of pain. I would know."

She lowered her eyes in sympathy. The man who'd raised Nico as his son had died five months ago. A month after that, she'd shown up and told him he had another father, which had torn the stitches of his still-healing grief. If anyone understood the pain she felt right now, it was Nico.

"Let me ease your pain tonight."

"How?" She looked up at him. "Can you bring people back to life?"

"I can bring *you* back to life."

She almost told him he was as arrogant as his father, but before she could speak, he kissed her.

Nervous as a virgin, her lips trembled under his. If it had been anyone but him, she would have wondered at this newfound shyness. She'd never been shy, never been demure, never been innocent. And yet, this was Kingsley's only son, and by sleeping with him she would lose something far more dear to her than her virginity had ever been.

"You're shaking," Nico said against her lips.

"I'm scared."

"Scared? Why?"

"I don't know."

"I'm here," he whispered. "You don't have to be afraid."

He was here. That was why she was afraid. But the fear didn't stop her from opening her mouth to receive his kiss. He kissed along her jawline to her ear, nipped at her earlobe. Over the pulse point on her neck, he pressed a long, languid kiss. The heat from his mouth seared her all the way to her spine. His kisses were neither tentative nor hurried. As he kissed her, her muscles slackened, her skin flushed with heat and the fear faded. For the first time in days, she felt human. Since meeting back in December, she and Nico had been in weekly contact. Emails, phone calls—he even wrote her letters by hand. Letters she read and reread and answered. Letters she burned before anyone found them.

Her head fell back as Nico kissed the hollow of her throat. He placed his hands on either side of her neck and rubbed his thumbs into the tendons of her shoulders.

"What's this?" he asked as he lifted the chain of her necklace.

Nora wrapped her hand around the pendant. She couldn't talk about it yet. It meant too much to her. Especially now.

"A saint medal. It's a Catholic thing."

"I know about saints. I am one, remember?"

"Saint Nicholas brought me Christmas early this year," she said, smiling as he kissed her throat.

“Although sleeping with him will put me on the naughty list for eternity.”

“It’s my list. I’ll be the judge of that.” He slipped the strap of her nightgown off her shoulder and traced her bare shoulder with his fingertips. Her body shivered with the pleasure from the touch of his work-roughened skin.

“You’re so beautiful in white.” Nico whispered the words into her ear as he ran his hand down her back, caressing the silk of her gown.

Nora said nothing. She’d bought the white gown to wear for Søren on their anniversary, a celebration that wouldn’t happen now.

She released the medal and it fell once more against her skin. She wrapped her arms around Nico’s broad shoulders and pressed her breasts to his chest. He wore a basic black cotton T-shirt and worn-in jeans. She wore a silk nightgown. He’d been working all day and had come to her with mud on his boots. She’d been mourning all week and came to him with sorrow in her heart.

“I want to spend all night inside you,” Nico breathed against her neck.

She pulled away from his embrace, but only to take him by the hand.

“Come upstairs,” she said. “We can sleep when we’re dead.”

She led him up to the bedroom. He released her hand to tend to the fading fire. He fed it with paper first, then kindling, then threw a log on top of the smoldering flames. The room warmed and glowed red from the heat and firelight.

“You’re good at that,” Nora said. “Do you have a fireplace at your house?”

“Two of them,” he said. *Two of zem*. Nora bit the inside of her mouth to keep from laughing. She’d learned from Nico that he’d spent a year in California and another year in Australia in his teens. Even though he lived in France now, he’d mastered English to the point that his accent was faint. Still there, but certainly not as pronounced as Kingsley’s deliberately exaggerated accent. But every now and then Nico’s accent came out in full force. “You should come to my home. I’d like you to see it.”

She’d refused all invitations to come to his home and instead met him in neutral locations—Arles, Marseille. She knew once they were alone together in his house or hers this would happen. And so it had.

“If I come to your house, will you put me to work?” she asked as she came to stand next to him. The fire crackled and a burning ash landed near her foot. Nico brushed it away with his bare hand.

“Everyone works at Rosanella.”

“I still can’t believe you are what you are.”

“Why not?” He smiled up at her.

“Kingsley does not get his hands dirty. Not in the literal sense anyway.”

“You think he’s ashamed that I’m a farmer?”

“You make wine. He drinks wine. He’s proud of you.”

Whether he’d admit it or not, Kingsley had fallen in love with the idea of being Nico’s father. “My son the vintner,” he said sometimes, and Nora saw the pride in his eyes. It broke her heart that Nico had yet to feel any pride that Kingsley was his father.

“And you?” Nico looked up at her from where he knelt on the floor. “Are you proud of me?”

“Does it matter?”

“It matters more that you’re proud of me than him.”

She caressed his face with the back of her hand. The slight stubble on his chin chafed her skin. Once she’d asked him what he was looking for every time he went to bed with a woman ten, fifteen, twenty years older than he. A mother figure? A teacher? A trainer? “My Rosanella,” Nico had answered, referring to the name of his vineyard’s bestselling Syrah, “the one woman who is all women.”

“Yes, my Nico. I’m proud of you.”

They gazed at each other. The shutters were closed. Fire alone warmed and brightened the room. Outside, the wind and rain poured and howled so wildly she imagined everyone but she and Nico had been wiped off the face of the earth. Only they two remained, sole survivors.

Nico rose up on his knees, put his hands on her waist and kissed her stomach through the fabric of her gown. Slowly he slid his hands down the backs of her legs and grasped her ankles. Nora buried her fingers in his hair as he kissed her bare thigh where it peeked out of the hip-high slit in her nightgown. He ran his hands back up her legs. Everything he did, every way he touched her, set her nerves tingling and her stomach tightening. Now with his thumbs he parted the slit of her gown. Nora grasped the bedpost behind her as Nico pressed a kiss onto the apex of her thighs. She pushed her hips forward and Nico sought her clitoris with his tongue.

“What’s this?” he asked, tickling the little metal hoop he’d found.

“Clit ring.”

Nico raised an eyebrow.

“I’m going to play with that later.”

“You can play with it now.”

She opened her legs wider, and he slid one finger between her wet seam and inside her. He hooked his finger over her pubic bone and ground his fingertip into the soft indentation he found there.

He teased her with his tongue before sucking on her clitoris in earnest. She leaned against the footboard behind her to steady herself. The room carried the heady scent of smoke. The heat from the fire stoked her own inner heat. She could hear Nico’s ragged breaths as he licked and kissed her. He turned his hand and pushed a second finger inside her. He spread his fingers apart, opening her up for him. Her inner muscles twitched around his hand. It was too much. She couldn’t wait anymore.

“Stop,” she ordered. Nico obeyed and rested back on his hands. She grasped the fabric of his T-shirt and he raised his arms. He unbuttoned his jeans as she tossed his shirt to the floor. Hard muscles lurked under his clothes—muscles he’d earned working the vineyard and not at a gym. He put those muscles to use as he rose up and pulled her hard against him. She felt his erection pressing against her. She raised one leg and wrapped it around his back, opening herself up to him. The tip went in easily and Nico lifted her and brought her down onto him, impaling her. It was only a few steps to the bed and he carried her there, laying her on her back across the burgundy coverlet.

Nico covered her body with his and drove into her with a slow sensuous thrust that sent ecstasy radiating from her back to her fingers. He pulled out to the tip and pushed back in again, her wet body giving him no resistance. He showed total mastery of his desire as he moved in her, advancing and retreating, performing the ancient steps of this primal dance with powerful male grace. He seemed in no hurry to come, as if he fully intended to stay inside her all night. She ran her hands down the length of his torso and let them rest at the small of his back. She could feel his taut muscles working as his back bowed every time he entered her and arched with each retreat.

With every thrust, Nora raised her hips to meet his. The base of his penis grazed her clitoris, and she lifted her head to kiss and bite his shoulders. Fluid ran out of her, glazing her inner thighs. She lifted her knees to open herself even more to him. She breathed in and inhaled his scent—warm and alive, like the new spring that surrounded them in the forest.

He slipped his hand between their bodies. She shivered beneath him, her head falling back against the bed as he grasped her swollen clitoris between his fingertips and stroked it. He pushed forcefully into her, and Nora gasped as her inner muscles clenched around him.

The world went still and silent around them. Nora couldn't even hear the storm anymore, the crackling of the fireplace, the creaking of the bed. All she could hear was the quiet metallic jangling of Nico's belt, his ragged breaths and the sound of her wetness.

Every part of her body went tight as Nico bore down on her, and came inside her with a shudder. He pulled out and kissed a path down her chest and stomach. With his head between her thighs he lapped at her clitoris again. Her back tensed, her stomach quivered, and she inhaled and forgot to breathe out. He pushed his fingers into her dripping body and sent her over the edge. Every muscle inside her spasmed violently. She hadn't had sex in so long that it felt as though a week's worth of orgasms thundered through her all at once.

Nico's semen spilled out of her and onto the bed. Nora wrapped her arms around him as he relaxed on top of her, covering her neck and shoulders in carnal kisses.

"Thank you," she said. "I needed that."

"So did I. I've needed it for months."

He kissed her long and deep on the mouth before pulling himself up.

He crawled off the bed and grabbed his shirt off the floor. She watched him pull himself back together. She'd always loved this part, watching a man dress after sex. She loved the perfunctory way Nico pulled on his shirt as if it never occurred to him she would be watching him and enjoying the view.

"Where are you going?"

"You need to drink my wine. Want some?"

"Nico, if you came in a cup I would drink it."

He stared at her. Had she actually made the son of Kingsley Edge blush?

"We'll save that vintage for later." With a wide grin, he left her alone in the bedroom.

She pulled herself up slowly. She'd come so hard even her arms trembled. Was that from the sex? Possibly. She also hadn't eaten anything all day. She cleaned herself off in the bathroom and found Nico downstairs in the kitchen uncorking a bottle of red wine. He handed her a glass, and she raised it to her lips. It had a sweet pungent scent, and when she drank it, she could taste its potency. A virginal wine, just like its maker.

"*Parfait.*" She sighed as she lowered the glass. "But that will get me drunk in about two more sips if I don't eat something."

"Sit," he said and pointed at the large battered armchair by the fireplace. "If you please."

She laughed at his chivalry.

"I do please," she said, sitting and pulling her legs to her chest. She felt relaxed now, loose limbs

and spent. She could almost make herself forget the box on the mantel. Almost. But not quite.

“What is it?” Nico asked.

“Nothing. Only wondering how much trouble I’m in for sleeping with you.”

“Trouble with whom?”

“Kingsley.”

“Is it his business?” From his tone, Nora could tell Nico had no plans to tell Kingsley anything about tonight.

“You’re his son. He’ll make it his business.”

Nico brought her a plate of cheese, crackers and grapes.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “If he’s angry, we’ll tell him I took advantage of you in your grief.”

“Oh, good idea. He might buy that except for the part where you took advantage of me.” She took the plate from him and balanced it on her knee. “He does know me, after all.”

“Being with you was my choice,” Nico said. “My choice, my consequences. Not yours.”

“*Oui, monsieur. Merci beaucoup,*” she said in her best sultry French.

“You know I speak English,” he reminded her as he took a grape off her plate.

“I know,” she said. “But I speak French, too. Thank your father for that skill.”

“He made you learn it?”

“He and Søren would speak it all the time around me while I stood there like an idiot not understanding a word. I had to learn it so I knew what they were saying about me.”

Nico sat on the floor in front of her, his arms clasped around his knees. He looked young sitting there like that, but still undeniably strong and masculine. In the low firelight she could see the veins on his forearms, and the light dusting of dark hair on his skin.

“How do you know Kingsley?” he asked between sips of wine.

“How do I know Kingsley? That’s a loaded question. You sure you want to know the answer?”

“I asked.” He shrugged his shoulders and in that moment, in that shrug, she saw his father in him. So dismissive. So French. So Kingsley.

“Why do you want to know?”

“I don’t understand him at all,” Nico confessed, and she saw a flash of grief in his eyes. Grief to match her own. She crooked her finger and Nico moved closer, close enough to kiss her knee and rest his chin on her thigh.

“He’s a hard man to like and a very easy man to love. But he’s nearly impossible to understand,” she said, caressing the back of his neck.

“But you understand him.”

“I do. But he and I, we’re the same in many ways.”

“I want to know him. I want to know you even more.”

“Unfortunately, there’s no way to tell you the story of Kingsley and me without telling you the story of Søren and me,” she said. “It’s all one story, the three of us.”

“Will it hurt to talk about it?”

“Yes,” she said. “But a little pain never stopped me before.”

“Will you tell me?” Nico asked. He took her hand in his, twining their fingers together. She looked down at their interlocked hands—his tanned, calloused hand dwarfed her paler, daintier fingers. Moments earlier he’d lain between her thighs, and only now did they hold hands for the first time. The day they’d met she’d told him who he was. Perhaps it was time to tell him who *she* was.

“Okay, story time, then. But I’ll charge you. I get paid for my stories.”

“I’ll pay you in orgasms.”

“It’s a deal,” Nora said and she and Nico laughed. God, it felt good to laugh like this again. A few days ago she would have bet she’d never laugh again. He turned his hand and sensuously rubbed the center of her palm with his thumb.

“Since this is the Black Forest, we should make it a fairy tale,” she said.

“I like fairy tales.”

“You’ll like this one, too. It begins with a whimper but ends in a bang.”

“Is it a real fairy tale? Are there witches and fairies in it?” he teased.

“Sort of.”

“Kings, yes?” Nico grinned.

“Definitely,” she said. “One king. One queen.”

“What else?”

“Since we’re in Grimm’s territory, we’re going to do this right,” she said. “Ready?”

Nico kissed Nora’s fingertips.

“Ready,” he said, gazing up at her with heat in his eyes. She could still scarcely believe Nico was here. She’d idly wished for him earlier and behold—he’d come to her in a storm, begging sanctuary. What other magic might work itself tonight?

“All Grimm’s fairy tales start and end the same way,” she said.

She took a deep breath and began.

“Once there lived ...” She paused and let the knife of grief stab her stomach again. She took the pain, breathed through it and let it out. “Once there lived ... a priest.”

3

Eleanor

SHE WAS EITHER DYING OR HAVING AN ORGASM. ELLE couldn't quite tell which.

"Something funny, Miss Schreiber?" her teacher demanded.

Elle glanced up and stared at Sister Margaret's forehead. Safer than looking her in the eyes.

"Nope. I ... That's a great sculpture," Elle said, pointing at the image on the projector screen at the front of her Catholic studies class. "Is she getting, you know, murdered there? Or ... something else?"

"Not murdered," Sister Margaret said with a smile. "Although I can understand why you might think that she was dying."

Sister Margaret turned back to the image of St. Teresa of Avila she'd projected onto the screen. Every Friday was Know Your Saints day at St. Xavier High School.

"This famous sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini is called the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. Teresa of Avila was a mystic. Can anyone tell me what a mystic is? Mr. Keyes?"

She pointed to Jacob Keyes in the front row.

"Um ..." he said. "People who had mystical experiences?"

Elle rolled her eyes. Didn't he know you weren't supposed to define a word with that same word?

"Close," Sister Margaret said. "Throughout our Catholic tradition, our clergy has acted as the intermediary between the faithful and God. Mystics are those rare souls who connect with God in a profound way without an intermediary. In the case of St. Teresa, an angel of the Lord came to her. Let's read her own words about it. Page three hundred seventy."

They all turned to the page and at the top in a box Elle read:

I saw an angel near me, on the left side in bodily form. In this vision it pleased the Lord that I should see it thus. He was not tall, but short, marvelously beautiful with a face which shone as though he were one of the highest of angels.... One of the highest of angels who seemed to be all of fire. I saw in his hands a long golden spear, and at the point of the iron there seemed to be a little fire. This I thought that he thrust several times into my heart, and that it penetrated to my entrails.

"As you can see," Sister Margaret said, "the sculptor was attempting to show the profound and sudden closeness to God St. Teresa experienced when the angel came to her and struck her with the arrow, and, Miss Schreiber, you seem to be laughing again. Would you care to share with the class exactly what you find so funny?"

Elle sensed all eyes in the class on her. She really wished Sister Margaret would stop calling on her. Maybe if she told her the truth, Sister Margaret might learn her lesson.

“Nothing,” Eleanor said. “Except St. Teresa’s having an orgasm.”

“Excuse me?” Sister Margaret sounded scandalized.

“Oh, come on. She’s got her head back and her eyes are closed and her mouth’s all open. And the angel is *thrusting* the arrow into her and she’s all on fire. Seriously, *penetrated to the entrails*? Sign me up for that. I wanna be a saint if I can get some of that action.”

The entire class burst into uproarious laughter. Only Sister Margaret didn’t seem amused.

“Eleanor,” Sister Margaret said and nothing more.

“I know. I know.” Elle gathered up her books and headed to the vice principal’s office.

Again.

Luckily V.P. Wells didn’t have time for a theological argument today. He told her to stop talking about orgasms in her Catholic studies class and she promised to keep her commentary to herself from now on. He only threatened her life once before sending her out. After gathering her books from her locker, Elle left school and headed home.

As she turned a corner at Elm Street, Elle sensed something behind her. She glanced back and saw a car in her peripheral vision. Ignoring it, she started walking again. The car followed, going slow enough to stay behind her.

Finally the driver pulled up next to her and rolled down the window.

“I lost my new puppy,” the man in the car said. “Will you come help me find him?”

“Oh, hell, no,” she said, glaring into the car at the almost-handsome man sitting behind the wheel. “I saw that very special episode of *Diff’rent Strokes*.”

“Then will you come help me drive this Porsche into the ground?”

“Oh, hell, yes!”

Elle raced around to the passenger side, threw herself in the car and launched herself into the driver’s arms.

“Dad, what are you doing here?” She clung to him tightly and pressed a kiss onto his cheek.

“I haven’t seen my little girl in weeks. I thought you’d want to come on a test drive with me.”

She slammed the door behind her.

“Then let’s drive.”

Her father put the car in gear and tore down the street. With her father at the wheel, the Porsche slunk through the narrow city streets with the lissome speed of a cheetah. Elle put on her seat belt without being told. Once they hit the highway her dad would rev the engine and swerve in and out of lanes. He knew where all the speed traps were and always had a radar detector with him.

“I love it.” Elle rubbed her hands over the dash.

“That’s real leather.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“Borrowed it from a friend.”

“Can I drive it?”

“You have a valid driver’s license and proof of insurance?”

Elle glared at him.

“Dad.”

“Fine.”

He took the exit ramp and they changed seats in a gas station parking lot.

“Now go easy,” he warned her as she put the car in gear. “It’s got a featherlight touch. The space shuttle doesn’t accelerate this fast.”

“That’s because the space shuttle doesn’t have its engine up its ass.”

Elle put her foot on the accelerator and gunned it. Gravity introduced itself to her body, but she and her stomach ignored the pressure and didn’t back off. Her dad was a good driver. She was better. He handled a car like a NASCAR driver. All power and speed. She drove like a Formula One driver—power and feminine finesse. Porsches required finesse. The engine sat in the back, not the front, and many a new Porsche owner had wrecked their baby on the way home from the car lot because they didn’t know how to handle a rear engine.

She took the exit and soon they were careening down a scenic two-lane highway at eighty miles an hour.

Her dad sat back, looking utterly relaxed even as the trees raced by them in nothing but a brown blur.

“Keep it steady. Don’t pump the accelerator.”

“I’m not pumping. I’m pushing. I love this car.”

“I’m not keeping you from something, am I?” her dad asked.

“Nah. Just a hot date with an extremely religious, much older guy.”

“Anybody I need to kill?”

“Already been killed. I have to write a paper on Jesus.”

“Okay, you can date Jesus. But nobody else.”

“He’s about the only guy I know of who doesn’t piss me off constantly,” she said.

“You’re never going to get a boyfriend with an attitude like that so ... keep that attitude.”

“I don’t want a boyfriend. Every guy at school is an asshole.”

“I’m happy to hear I don’t have to get the shotgun out yet. I kind of like the thought of you not having a boyfriend. Ever.”

“Don’t worry. No boys for me.”

“Girls?” He gave her a steady, “is there something you need to tell me” stare.

She shook her head.

“No girls, either.”

“Thank God.”

“I want a man.”

“Where’s my shotgun?”

“Right here.”

Elle gunned the engine.

“Mom said I’m not allowed to date. Ever, I think. She didn’t give me an age.”

“You know your mother. She doesn’t want you getting in trouble like she did.”

“You mean knocked up at seventeen? And whose fault is that?”

“Elle, shut up and drive.”

“Sorry, Dad.”

Elle shut her mouth and concentrated on the curves ahead. They could come out of nowhere on these back roads, but that was what made the drive so much fun. Whipping around curves, facing the unknown, looking death in the face. It was exactly like high school, except for the part about it being fun.

As they drove deeper into nowhere, Elle noticed her father studying her.

“What?” she asked. “Something wrong?”

“You look like your mother.”

“You want me to let you out right here?” She pointed at the expanse of nothingness around them.

“Your mother is a very beautiful woman.”

“She is a very crazy woman who is driving me crazy. Did I mention the crazy?”

“What’s she doing that’s so crazy these days?”

“Our priest, Father Greg, is sick. Mom worshipped him so she’s real upset.”

“Did you worship him?”

“He called me *Ellen*.”

Elle turned around in a driveway.

“I have homework,” she said. “I should get home.”

“No problem. Glad I got to see my baby girl.”

“Ugh. Don’t call me that.”

Her father laughed and ruffled her hair. Maybe she could crash the car in such a way it would only hit his side....

“Sorry, kid. You’re growing up too fast.”

“You know I’ll be sixteen in less than three weeks.”

“God, you make me feel old.” He exhaled heavily. Her dad wasn’t old at all. Only thirty-five. And he would have looked thirty-five if he didn’t live so hard. He drank too much, did things he shouldn’t, hung out with bad, scary people. But still, he didn’t make her go to church or do her homework, and between him and her mom, she knew which parent she preferred to hang out with.

“I can’t wait to get older. Trust me, I’m counting the minutes until my birthday. Driver’s license here I come.”

Elle grinned at the prospect of finally being able to drive to school, drive to the city, drive anywhere she wanted, especially away from her mom and her house and her life.

“Elle?”

“What?”

“You know I can’t buy you a car, right? And neither can your mom.”

Her stomach knotted up.

“Dad, you promised me two years ago—”

“I had a lot more money two years ago than I do now.”

“What happened?”

“Life’s expensive. Business isn’t great.”

“Business isn’t great,” she repeated. “You mean the car-stealing, chop-shop business? Did that get hit by the recession, too?”

“You have a smart mouth,” her father said, all affection gone from his voice.

“If you weren’t going to buy me a car, you shouldn’t have promised me one.”

“You want to keep this one?”

“You’re the car thief in the family, not me.”

“Can you back off me for five fucking seconds, please?”

Elle pulled over a block from her house, where there would be no chance of her mom seeing her with her father.

She turned off the car and sat in silence.

“Elle ... baby ... I’m sorry. I wish I could buy you anything you wanted, but I can’t right now. I owe some money. I have to pay it back.”

“Whatever.”

“Don’t be like that. You know I love you, and I’d do anything for you.”

“I know,” she said, although she wasn’t certain that she did. “I gotta go.”

Her father grabbed her forearm, pulled her over and gave her a gruff kiss on the cheek.

“Don’t be mad at your dad. He’s doing the best he can.”

“Tell my dad I’m not mad.” Her shoulders sagged. Her heart sagged. Her hopes sagged. “I just wish things were different.”

“Yeah, well ... you and me both, kid.”

She gave him a faint smile and got out of the car.

She shut the door behind her and said under her breath, “Don’t call me *kid*.”

As she walked the final block to her house she choked back tears of disappointment. Two years ago on her fourteenth birthday, he’d promised her with all his heart and all his soul he would get her a car for her sixteenth birthday. And she’d believed him even though deep down she knew better. He made promises all the time and never kept them. *I promise I’ll see you at Christmas. I promise I’ll make the school play. I promise I’ll get a new job so you won’t have to worry about me*. Promises made, never kept. One day she’d learn.

Maybe it was her fault. Maybe nobody could be trusted to do what they said they’d do. Once in her life she’d love to have someone who gave enough of a shit about her to make her a promise and keep it. For once she wanted someone to treat her like she mattered.

Nice pipe dream there. That happening was about as likely as her getting banged by an angel like Santa Teresa.

Eleanor unlocked the back door and walked into the kitchen. The car was in the driveway, but where was her mom? Her mom worked the night shift as a motel manager and did bookkeeping part-time for a small construction company. If she wasn't at work, she was either asleep or at the kitchen table with her ledgers and adding machine. Eleanor made herself dinner—a bowl of cereal—and went into the living room to eat.

She found her mom in her shabby bathrobe curled up on the frayed paisley couch, wiping her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Elle asked her mother. Her mom swiped at her face with a tissue. “Did Father Greg die?”

“No,” her mother said, pushing a hank of black hair over her ear. “But he’s probably not coming back. Not anytime soon.”

“I’m sorry,” Elle said, sitting cross-legged on the floor. Her mom never let her eat on the furniture, which made no sense. The furniture was old and threadbare and stained. Like a little cereal on the couch was going to make things any worse than they already were. “What’s going to happen?”

“We’re getting a new priest in the meantime,” her mother said, entirely without enthusiasm.

“That’s good, right?”

“No, it’s not good.”

“Why not?”

“The new priest is ...”

“What?”

“He’s a Jesuit.”

“A what?”

“A Jesuit,” her mother repeated. “They’re an order of priests. They founded your high school, although I don’t think any Jesuits teach there anymore.”

“Are they bad priests?”

“They’re scholars,” she said. “Scientists. And very, very liberal.”

“That’s a bad thing?”

“Jesuits are ... They can be ... It might be fine. I would have preferred a loving shepherd to a scholar, though.”

“Well,” Elle said, taking a bite of her cereal, “maybe you’ll get lucky. Maybe this new priest will really love sheep.”

Her mother glared at her.

“I know. I know,” she said for the second time today. She gathered her food and her books and went to her room. Did no one like having her around?

She finished up her cereal in her room and stared at her pile of homework. But how could she even think about doing homework with so much shit going on? Her dad wasn’t getting her a car for her birthday like he promised. Her mom was having a nervous breakdown over the new priest. And she was turning sixteen in a couple of weeks and had no boyfriend, no money, no car forthcoming and no hope that things were going to get better, now or ever. Her stomach felt like someone had punched it. Her head ached and her throat itched. She didn’t know if she wanted to scream or cry or both at the same time.

Instead she walked into the bathroom and locked the door behind her.

She turned on her curling iron and sat on the toilet while waiting for it to heat up.

Five minutes later she stood in front of the counter and rolled her left sleeve up. She picked up the curling iron and took a breath.

Easy. You can do this. She started the countdown.

Three.

Two.

One.

On the *one* Elle pushed the burning metal barrel against her left wrist. She whimpered as pain scalded her right to her soul. She lifted the curling iron off her arm, then pressed it back down again. After one full second she pulled it off and dropped the curling iron back onto the counter.

She panted through the pain, not fighting it, but accepting it, relishing it, letting it remind her she was alive and could feel everything she wanted to feel. There were boys at school who would have cried like little bitches if they'd gotten burned like that.

She rolled her sleeve down over the burns and turned off her curling iron. She went back to her room and sat on her bed, her hands still slightly shaking. She opened her math book and got out a pencil.

She felt much better now.

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