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STEVEN WAS IN THE garden on his hands and knees, weeding with a trowel. It was fall, and though shaded by a tree he still mopped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief and brushed the flies from his face.

Brother Andrew came rushing up. "Come quickly," he said.

"Why?" said Steven. "What's the matter?"

"It's Dominic. There's something the matter with Dominic."

Steven dropped his trowel and hurried behind the monk until they reached the laboratory. Thomas stood anxiously at the door. Inside, Dominic lay facedown on the stone floor, motionless. Steven turned him over and felt his father's wrist for any sign of a pulse. Pressing an ear against Dominic's chest, he strained to hear a heartbeat, but it was as soundless as an owl's flight.

Frantically he began pushing violently on Dominic's chest with both hands.

"Father! Father!" Steven yelled. "Please, Father! Don't die!"

Thomas and Andrew pulled him off, but Steven broke free and clung to Dominic's body. He buried his face in his father's chest, weeping uncontrollably.

STEVEN COULD not bring himself to attend the funeral or burial. Instead, he showered Dominic's empty bed in a blanket of

white rose petals he had collected from the garden in the same wicker basket his father had carried him in as an infant. Then he locked himself in Dominic's room and placed the key on the mantel. He remained there for two days while the bells sounded for prayers, offices, and meals, studying the cell that had belonged to the simple apothecary monk. He gazed at the portrait of St. Francis that hung on the wall and at the wooden kneeler at the foot of the bed, cushioned and covered in exquisite purple linen with a simple white cross embroidered in the middle, that Brother Gregory had made for him as a birthday gift. It was hardly worn. Dominic had spent more time praying on the stone floor than on his comfortable kneeler.

Steven painfully recalled the night of his father's secret confession. A few days before his ninth birthday, curious as to why he had a father but no mother, he had asked Dominic who his mother was. Years earlier, all the monks had agreed that the truth was to remain a secret until Steven was old enough to be told. They also had agreed it would be Dominic who would tell him.

That evening Dominic came to Steven's room just before midnight and gently caressed his son until he awoke. "Get dressed," he said. "I've something to tell you."

They walked outside the abbey to where the fields began. Not a cloud obstructed the dark sky. The bright disc of a full moon floated above them, obscuring the stars and covering everything in a mantle of light that made the fields shimmer like a glassy lake. Steven could pick out all the details of his surroundings.

"When you were little," Dominic said, "I held you up to this same sky and prayed you would find happiness with us. But I didn't bring you out here now to speak of that. I brought you here to tell you something else."

Steven felt Dominic's hand slide into his.

"I am not your real father," Dominic said. "I found you in this field when you were an infant. You have a father and a mother somewhere, but we never found them."

Steven was struck silent. Minutes passed. Then he said, "Does that mean you don't love me?"

Dominic bent down and looked steadily into Steven's searching eyes. "Don't ever think that I don't love you. Ever. Your parents abandoned you. I never will. Until the last breath has expired from these lungs, I will always love you."

He took Steven in his arms and held him wordlessly for a very long time. Then father and son turned around and walked back into the monastery.

The day before Dominic's death, they were sitting in the garden, under the shade of their favorite tree.

"Are you still angry with me for burning Michael's drawings?" Dominic said.

Steven was surprised by the suddenness of Dominic's question. He was slow to answer. "No."

"Do you think what I did was wrong?"

From the tone of Dominic's voice, Steven could tell that his father had wrestled with his conscience over this matter.

"I do not fully agree with what you did," Steven said. "What I do realize now is that you were only trying to protect him."

Dominic turned to Steven and put a hand on his cheek. Steven saw his old, tired eyes grow moist.

"You have grown up," Dominic said. "Oftentimes we do not see clearly what our path is. There was much about Michael that opened every one of us up to questions. I know that in some ways you are still struggling with your faith. You can decide these things for yourself. And you will. All in all, you must listen to your heart. I want you to know that you have been the source of my life's greatest happiness."

Steven lit a fire in Dominic's fireplace. He took the Bible that sat on the table by the bed, opened it, and page by page fed it to the flames. When that was done, he removed the wooden crucifix from the wall above the bed and did the same. Now he knew what anger at God was.

Steven went to his own cell. He removed the habit from his body and put on the overalls he used for gardening. Then he went in search of the abbot and handed him the brown robe. "I cannot stay here any longer," he said. "I'm not fit for this. I can't be expected to believe in anything any longer. Forgive me."

"You need a break," said the abbot. "I think I know just the thing. I'll phone Dr. Cotter in the village and ask if he could use an assistant."

THE ONLY monk Steven said good-bye to was Thomas, whom he found in the kitchen.

"I'm leaving," Steven said.

Thomas wiped his hands on his apron. "What do you mean?"

"I'm leaving the monastery."

"For good?"

Steven was silent.

"Where will you go?"

"The abbot has secured me a position with Dr. Cotter in the village. I'm to be his assistant."

"Is this permanent, then?"

Steven nodded, and Thomas gave him a warm embrace. "If you need anything at all, let me know."

DR. COTTER was a tall, affable man who was liked by everyone in the village. He set upon Steven the tasks of cataloging and ordering medicine, organizing the medical supplies, and keeping his records up to date. Steven learned a great deal from this tireless man who listened carefully to his patients' complaints.

Steven lived in the home of the doctor and his wife, Margaret, who was every bit as approachable as her husband. He found Mrs. Cotter endearing in the same way he found Brother Thomas. She always made sure Steven had everything he needed and prepared wonderful meals that often made him homesick. From Brother Thomas, Steven received weekly letters filling him in on all the news at the cloister. Steven looked forward to receiving the familiar envelopes written in the monk's bold handwriting.

AFTER TWO days in the hospital, Michael was glad when Amanda came to collect him. He was worried that he had embarrassed and humiliated her so much that she never wanted anything to do with him again.

On the bus ride to her flat they said nothing. It was only after Michael eagerly devoured the steak and chips Amanda cooked for him when they got home that Amanda broke the silence. "The police know."

"I know," said Michael, regret registering in his voice. "I was hoping you wouldn't find out. They interviewed me in the hospital."

"You haven't been truthful with me," Amanda said. "I deserve to know everything, from the beginning. Something upset you to make you do this."

Nothing was lost in his story. Michael painted for Amanda a vivid picture of a boy orphaned at an early age, his life at the monastery, his burning passion for art, his admission to the academy, and the promise of a bright future. He told her of Suzanne and his subsequent derailment from life. He told her of finding the tree with the inscription, and the avalanche of memories it triggered.

Aside from Steven, he had never told anyone about his past. Now that it was revealed, he felt naked and vulnerable, no longer protected.

“My intention was to annihilate the pain, not myself,” he said.

Amanda locked her arms around him and was grateful he was alive.

STEVEN HAD been gone from the monastery nearly two months when he received a surprise visit from Brother Thomas. The two relaxed on the sofa in front of the fireplace in the Cotters' tiny living room. The doctor and his wife were out.

“You need to see something,” Thomas said.

“Where?”

“Back at the cloister.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No. But I think you should see this.”

Steven knew Thomas would not have come if it was not important. The two took a taxi back to the cloister. Thomas led Steven by the hand to Dominic's laboratory. When they got to the door, Steven hesitated.

“I'm not ready to go in,” he said.

Since Dominic's death, his laboratory and his greenhouse were the two places Steven wanted to avoid.

“I know,” Thomas said in his thick Welsh accent. “But you need to see this. I'm here. Don't worry. It's alright.”

Thomas opened the door and walked through first. Steven followed and was immediately struck by the reminders of Dominic's devotion to his work, the books and notes on the table left just as they were at the time of his death. Steven had instructed that nothing be touched except the medicines. Sick friars still needed medication.

Steven could picture Dominic standing in the middle of his laboratory. “I have so many wonderful medicines here,” he used to say. Yet in the end, neither they nor his knowledge could prevent his untimely death.

It was winter, and snow blanketed the ground outside. But inside Dominic's laboratory, every flower and plant bloomed as if it were spring. The room was filled with the most wondrous scents and smells, giving off a symphony of intoxicating, seductive perfumes and fragrances that overpowered Steven.

"This is unusual," Steven said. "Have you been watering them?"

"I have," said Thomas. "But I've never—"

"It's the same in the greenhouse?"

"Yes." The monk placed a hand on Steven's shoulder. "I think it's Dominic. He's trying to tell you that he's alright."

Steven was stunned. Then he said suddenly, "I need some bread."

They went into the kitchen, where Thomas gave him half a loaf. Steven tore it into pieces and stuffed it into his pockets. He dashed out the back of the monastery and into the snow. Making his way to the water's edge, he removed the bread from his pockets. He shredded it into crumbs and held it out in his palms. As if summoned by some magic bell, the birds came, first in pairs, then in flocks.

From that moment on Steven knew he belonged at the monastery.

WHILE STEVEN was working in the village, Brother Lawrence stripped Dominic's cell, leaving the laboratory untouched according to Steven's wishes. Lifting the mattress, Lawrence found three leather-bound volumes wrapped in a protective cloth lying neatly side by side on the bedsprings. The dull brown leather books, whose pages numbered exactly one hundred each, were filled with handwritten text. Of his discovery Lawrence told no one, and upon Steven's return he gave the books to him.

That evening Steven examined them. After reading a portion of the text, Steven paused in a moment of conflict. It was evident

that these were not notes on medicine or medical practice, but the private notes and inner soul searchings of a monk. The practice of diary writing, of recording one's thoughts and emotions, translated into material possession, which constituted a breach of the rule's order of poverty. Every monk had taken that vow. The material world no longer belonged to them; neither did their own lives, their thoughts, or their feelings. All were deemed the monastery's exclusive property, and no individual had the right to own or record them in any fashion.

Although forbidden, diaries were not uncommon. For centuries, in the quiet hours past midnight, monks scribbled their secrets in their cells by candlelight and kept them hidden under mattresses or in secret recesses. Decades earlier a journal, penned by a long-departed monk at the turn of the century, had been found wrapped in cloth and stuffed into a crevice in the brick wall of a cell. It had been concealed by a loose brick. But neither the abbot's wrath nor the breaking of the abbey's code was enough to deter the determined few. Dominic was astute enough to know that one day his journals would be discovered.

Steven was reminded of how Dominic had treated Michael's artwork. He could, without further delay, obediently bring the diaries to the abbot's attention without reviewing them himself. That would mean the risk of never knowing what was in those volumes, for there was every chance that the abbot would destroy them, as Dominic destroyed Michael's works to protect him from harm.

In the end, Steven decided against handing them over to the abbot. After all, they were the words of his father, and he had every right to know what was inside the mind of the man who had found him and raised him.

Alone in his cell, Steven opened the first volume and saw Dominic's distinctive handwriting in faded blue ink. His hands

trembled as he held the journal that the monk had secretly kept from prying eyes. The entries began shortly after Dominic's arrival at the monastery. They spoke of a lonely man struggling to find himself within the rigid structure of this new social order. It was then Steven realized he was not the only one to have doubts about his calling.

STEVEN WENT to work in the laboratory every day. When something gnawed at him, he would sit down in Dominic's chair. The shifting daylight slanted through the large bay windows, flooding the room and pooling across the polished stone floor. He faced the table, built centuries earlier by a friar of their order. The size of an English baron's dining table, it was a vast expanse of cherry wood. When he was alive, Dominic would spread out before him reams of papers, notes, and books that Steven had now stacked neatly at the corners. A lamp illuminated only a small portion of the table. Dominic preferred to work during the day when there was plenty of light, but on occasion he needed to work at night. Steven recollected how much Dominic loved to work at the table. Sometimes, when it was raining and Steven was working, he thought he heard Dominic's voice and familiar footsteps. But when he looked around, no one was there.

Although his father didn't mind the cold when he worked, Steven hated it. He filled the grate of the laboratory's fireplace with logs and relished listening to the crackling fire. Intermittently he would get up to warm himself, standing with his back to the flames as he read.

Since Dominic's death, Steven had been unable to pray. He only went through the motions in chapel during the offices. But now he found new meaning in the ancient words. At night in his cell, he welcomed the ritual by his bed. He prayed in his underwear, his habit resting on a hanger on the closet door.

IN MICHAEL'S pay packet from work was a handwritten note from the academy principal summoning him to his office. For the first time in weeks, Michael appeared at the school during class hours. He sat in the chair opposite the principal's desk.

The principal was taken aback by Michael's appearance and smell. The young student had neglected himself. It was apparent he had not bathed or shaved in weeks.

"Are you alright?" the principal said.

Michael nodded. The principal put on his glasses and studied a piece of paper in his hands. "Am I to understand that you are no longer attending classes?"

"Yes, sir. That's correct."

"And why is that?"

"I've lost interest, sir."

"We expected you to enter the annual academy competition, but you did not submit anything."

"I've lost my inspiration, sir."

The principal scratched his head. "That's hard to believe, given the dedication you brought to your studies until most recently."

"I'm sorry, sir," Michael said.

The principal sighed. "I see." He scribbled something on the piece of paper, then folded his hands on top of it. "Well, I'm sorry to hear that, but this sort of thing happens. If you change your mind, come and see me. Take until the new term begins to think this through. You can keep your job, provided you show up every night. But you know the college rules regarding scholarships. Should you choose to leave the school, after this term we can no longer finance your living accommodations."

The principal waited several moments for an answer.

"Thank you," Michael said finally before walking out of the room.

"MOVE IN with me," Amanda said.

Michael returned to his flat to collect what few things would be of use to him. His paints, canvases, drawings, books, sketch-books, and artist's tools he left behind. He scribbled an apologetic letter to his landlord. Before sealing the envelope and slipping it through the mail slot in the door, he dropped in the key.

AMANDA'S OCCUPATION was something of a mystery to Michael. Whenever he asked her what she did, all she said was, "I work nights."

Michael never pursued it any further. Initially he thought she was a waitress, but he later ruled that out. She always came home long after all the restaurants had closed. Perhaps she was a cocktail hostess at one of the casinos in Mayfair?

He began observing her routine more closely. She rose at noon from a comalike sleep. Tugging a dressing gown around her, she sauntered into the tiny kitchen and made herself a cup of tea and some toast. After bathing, she spent the rest of the day doing housework. Except to shop, she seldom left the flat.

At five thirty in the afternoon, a remarkable transformation took place. After bathing again, she applied heavy eye makeup and thick red lipstick, and worked on her hair for more than forty-five minutes. When she stepped out of the bathroom, the strong scent of perfume followed her. Michael noticed that her style of dress did not match her makeup; it was more casual, while there was an air of formality about her makeup. By eight thirty she was out the door, and returned usually around three o'clock in the morning, accompanied by the smell of tobacco.

"What do you do?" Michael said one morning over breakfast.

Amanda lit a cigarette and blew out the smoke. "I'm a working girl," she said.

"Working girl?"

She casually munched on a slice of toast with jam. "On the game. Or to be more polite, a lady of the night."

Michael stopped eating. "A . . . prostitute?" He could not believe what he had heard. "How long have you been doing this, then?"

"Since I was sixteen."

Although Michael was shocked, it all made sense. Her drug taking and her virtuoso lovemaking fit in with her nocturnal occupation. "Why do you do it?"

"The money's good and I enjoy sex. But once I got hooked, I needed to support my habit. In the beginning I thought I could just make some good money, then get out."

"So you're a streetwalker?"

"No," she said. "I don't do that."

"Do you ever bring men home?"

"Used to. I have an office now."

"An office," Michael repeated.

"I linked up with some friends who work the Houses. Since then, it's been steady work, and good pay."

"Houses?"

"Parliament."

"So your clients are . . . ?"

"Mostly civil servants, MPs, peers. I have a few solicitors and businessmen, too, from the financial district. But in the past my clientele were not always so upscale. Streetwalking was rough back then. On occasion I'd come home with cuts and bruises. It all came with the territory." She sighed, taking a sip of tea. "There are always a few rotten apples in the bunch."

Michael had noticed the scars but had said nothing. One was a single knife wound on her upper back, no larger than a shilling. Another ran along her right inner thigh for three inches. With its stitches and serpentine shape, it resembled an insect with many legs.

"How did you get that one on your leg?" said Michael.

"A black man slashed me with a cutthroat razor."

“Why?”

“He wanted sex for free. I refused and so he cut me. Since then I avoid black men.”

“I’d like to see where you work,” Michael said.

Amanda was reluctant at first, but after a month or so of Michael’s badgering, she took him with her to Soho. Next to a Chinese restaurant was an inconspicuous door she unlocked. They climbed a flight of stairs. When they got to the top, she unlocked another door.

“This is my office,” she said, swinging it open.

It wasn’t what he had expected. Michael saw a cramped bed-sit with an adjoining bathroom and no kitchen. Two windows overlooked the street below. The beige carpet was old and worn, and a battered wooden dresser supported a small pile of fresh white towels. The bed, newly sheeted and impeccably made, was turned down, ready for use. He could smell the freshness of the linens. A single bedside lamp provided the only light. There was no phone.

Michael had expected something elegant or grand, like the paintings and photos he had seen of Parisian bordellos at the turn of the century. Instead, Amanda’s office was spartan and clean. In the corner was a wardrobe that had no doors. It was stuffed with bright red bras, lace knickers, garter belts, and hose. Michael realized why Amanda always left the flat in casual clothes; she had the luxury of changing into her working clothes here.

He gulped. *Just what was he getting himself into?*

AS BROTHER Thomas reached for his mug of tea, the sleeve of his habit brushed the chessboard, knocking two pieces off. He reached down and picked them up from the ground. With his habit, he wiped the dirt from them and replaced them on the board.

It was four in the afternoon. Thomas and Steven had been sitting on one of the corner benches in the garden since two o’clock,

playing chess. Despite the intense sun, it was still a chilly spring day. Thomas had a shawl wrapped around his shoulders. The chessboard lay between them, flanked by two steaming mugs of tea.

“Your move,” said Thomas.

After Steven moved one of his knights, he brought his mug of tea to his lips. “Do you ever think about God?” he said.

Thomas intently studied the board. “In what sense?”

“Well, what do you picture God as, an old man on a throne with a long white beard?”

Thomas scratched his head. “Never saw God as anything like that. Mind you, many do.”

“Then what?”

“To me, it’s not a matter of who God is, but where you find Him. Many find Him in church, for instance. I never do, though.”

“Where do you find Him, then?”

Thomas took another sip of tea. “In cooking.”

Steven was baffled by the answer. Thomas moved a piece on the chessboard.

“Cooking?” Steven said.

“Dominic, as you know, found God in nature.”

Steven remembered visiting his father in his laboratory one morning long ago, when he was just a boy of seven. He found Dominic as he usually did, hunched over his work table, intent on his manuals and medicines. The physician stopped what he was doing when he saw Steven. “What is it, my son?”

“Father, what is God?”

Without hesitation, Dominic rose from the table. He took Steven by the hand and walked him to the open doorway that led to the garden. They stood in the doorway for a moment. Outside, the garden exploded with color from a variety of flowers. Everything was bathed in sunlight. Birds sang, butterflies fluttered from one flower to the next, trees rustled in the breeze. At

the far end of the garden Brother Samson sang happily to himself.

“This is God,” said Dominic.

Thomas moved another piece on the chessboard, bringing Steven back to the present. “We all find God in our own way,” Thomas said. “You must find him in yours.”

“Yes, but where?”

“That’s for you to discover. Nobody can do that for you. Be patient.”