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more...

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In closing, we would like to distance ourselves from any misinterpretation of scripture by Wayne P. Buck, or any misapplication of the golden ratio by Professor Von Menck. All persons, police departments, corporations, institutions, governmental agencies, and locations both American and Italian mentioned in this novel are either fictitious or used fictitiously.

1

Agnes Torres parked her white Ford Escort in the little parking area outside the hedge and stepped into the cool dawn air. The hedges were twelve feet high and as impenetrable as a brick wall; only the shingled peak of the big house could be seen from the street. But she could hear the surf thundering and smell the salt air of the invisible ocean beyond.

Agnes carefully locked the car—it paid to be careful, even in this neighborhood—and, fumbling with the massive set of keys, found the right one and stuck it into the lock. The heavy sheet-metal gate swung inward, exposing a broad expanse of green lawn that swept three hundred yards down to the beach, flanked by two dunes. A red light on a keypad just inside the gate began blinking, and she entered the code with nervous fingers. She had thirty seconds before the sirens went off. Once, she had dropped her keys and couldn't punch in the code in time, and the thing had awakened practically the whole town and brought three

2 Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child

police cars. Mr. Jeremy had been so angry she thought he would breathe fire. It had been awful.

Agnes punched the last button and the light turned green. She breathed a sigh of relief, locked the gate, and paused to cross herself. Then she drew out her rosary, held the first bead reverently between her fingers. Fully armed now, she turned and began waddling across the lawn on short, thick legs, walking slowly to allow herself time to intone the Our Fathers, the Hail Marys, and the Glory Bes in quiet Spanish. She always said a decade on her rosary when entering the Grove Estate.

The vast gray house loomed in front of her, a single eyebrow window in the roof peak frowning like the eye of a Cyclops, yellow against the steel gray of the house and sky. Seagulls circled above, crying restlessly.

Agnes was surprised. She never remembered that light on before. What was Mr. Jeremy doing in the attic at seven o'clock in the morning? Normally he didn't get out of bed until noon.

Finishing her prayers, she replaced the rosary and crossed herself again: a swift, automatic gesture, made with a rough hand that had seen decades of domestic work. She hoped Mr. Jeremy wasn't still awake. She liked to work in an empty house, and when he was up, everything was so unpleasant: the cigarette ashes he dropped just behind her mop, the dishes he heaped in the sink just after she had washed, the comments and the endless swearing to himself, into the phone or at the newspaper, always followed by a harsh laugh. His voice was like a rusty knife—it cut and slashed the air. He was thin and mean and stank of cigarettes and drank brandy at lunch and entertained sodomites

at all hours of the day and night. Once he had tried to speak Spanish with her but she had quickly put an end to that. Nobody spoke Spanish to her except family and friends, and Agnes Torres spoke English perfectly well enough.

On the other hand, Agnes had worked for many people in her life, and Mr. Jeremy was very correct with her employment. He paid her well, always on time, he never asked her to stay late, never changed her schedule, and never accused her of stealing. Once, early on, he had blasphemed against the Lord in her presence, and she had spoken to him about it, and he had apologized quite civilly and had never done it again.

She came up the curving flagstone path to the back door, inserted a second key, and once again fumbled nervously with the keypad, turning off the internal alarm.

The house was gloomy and gray, the mullioned windows in front looking out on a long seaweed-strewn beach to an angry ocean. The sound of the surf was muffled here and the house was hot. Unusually hot.

She sniffed. There was a strange smell in the air, like a greasy roast left too long in the oven. She waddled into the kitchen but it was empty. The dishes were heaped up, and the place was a mess as usual, stale food everywhere, and yet the smell wasn't coming from here. It looked like Mr. Jeremy had cooked fish the night before. She didn't usually clean his house on Tuesdays, but he'd had one of his countless dinner parties the prior evening. Labor Day had come and gone a month before, but Mr. Jeremy's weekend parties wouldn't end until November.

She went into the living room and sniffed the air again. Something was definitely cooking somewhere. And there

was another smell on top of it, as if somebody had been playing with matches.

Agnes Torres felt a vague sense of alarm. Everything was more or less as she had left it when she went away yesterday, at two in the afternoon, except that the ashtrays were overflowing with butts and the usual empty wine bottles stood on the sideboard, dirty dishes were piled in the sink, and someone had dropped soft cheese on the rug and stepped in it.

She raised her plump face and sniffed again. The smell came from above.

She mounted the sweep of stairs, treading softly, and paused to sniff at the landing. She tiptoed past Grove's study, past his bedroom door, continued down the hall, turned the dogleg, and came to the door leading to the third floor. The smell was stronger here and the air was heavier, warmer. She tried to open the door but found it locked.

She took out her bunch of keys, clinked through them, and unlocked the door. *Madre de Dios*—the smell was much worse. She mounted the steep unfinished stairs, one, two, three, resting her arthritic legs for a moment on each tread. She rested again at the top, breathing heavily.

The attic was vast, with one long hall off which were half a dozen unused children's bedrooms, a playroom, several bathrooms, and an unfinished attic space jammed with furniture and boxes and horrible modern paintings.

At the far end of the hall, she saw a bar of yellow light under the door to the last bedroom.

She took a few tentative steps forward, paused, crossed herself again. Her heart was hammering, but with

her hand clutching the rosary she knew she was safe. As she approached the door, the smell grew steadily worse.

She tapped lightly on it, just in case some guest of Mr. Jeremy was sleeping in there, hungover or sick. But there was no response. She grasped the doorknob and was surprised to find it slightly warm to the touch. Was there a fire? Had somebody fallen asleep, cigarette in hand? There was definitely a faint smell of smoke, but it wasn't just smoke somehow: it was something stronger. Something foul.

She tried the doorknob, found it locked. It reminded her of the time, when she was a little girl at the convent school, when crazy old Sister Ana had died and they had to force open her door.

Somebody on the other side might need her assistance; might be sick or incapacitated. Once again she fumbled with the keys. She had no idea which one went to the door, so it wasn't until perhaps the tenth try that the key turned. Holding her breath, she opened the door, but it moved only an inch before stopping, blocked by something. She pushed, pushed harder, heard a crash on the other side.

Santa María, it was going to wake up Mr. Jeremy. She waited, but there was no sound of his tread, no slamming bathroom door or flushing toilet, none of the sounds that signaled his irascible rising.

She pushed at the door and was able to get her head inside, holding her breath against the smell. A thin screen of haze drifted in the room, and it was as hot as an oven. The room had been shut up for years—Mr. Jeremy despised children—and dirty spiderwebs hung from the

peeling beadboard walls. The crash had been caused by the toppling of an old armoire that had been pushed up against the door. In fact, all the furniture in the room seemed to have been piled against the door, except for the bed. The bed, she could see, was on the far side of the room. Mr. Jeremy lay on it, fully clothed.

"Mr. Jeremy?"

But Agnes Torres knew there would be no answer. Mr. Jeremy wasn't sleeping, not with his charred eyes burned permanently open, the ashy cone of his mouth frozen in a scream and his blackened tongue—swelled to the size of a chorizo sausage—sticking straight up from it like a flagpole. A sleeping man wouldn't be lying with his elbows raised above the bed, fists clenched so hard that blood had leaked between the fingers. A sleeping man wouldn't have his torso scorched and caved in upon itself like a burned log. She had seen many dead people during her childhood in Colombia, and Mr. Jeremy looked deader than any of them. He was as dead as they come.

She heard someone speaking and realized it was herself, murmuring *En el nombre del Padre, y del Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo* . . . She crossed herself yet again, fumbling out her rosary, unable to move her feet or take her eyes from the scene in the room. There was a scorched mark on the floor, right at the foot of the bed: a mark which Agnes recognized.

In that moment, she understood exactly what had happened to Mr. Jeremy Grove.

A muffled cry escaped her throat and she suddenly had the energy to back out of the room and shut the door. She fumbled with the keys and relocked it, all the while mur-

muring *Creo en Dios, Padre todopoderoso, creador del cielo y de la tierra*. She crossed herself again and again and again, clutching the rosary and holding it up to her chest as she backed down the hall, step by step, sobs mingling with her mumbled prayers.

The cloven hoofprint burned into the floor told her everything she needed to know. The devil had finally come for Jeremy Grove.

2

The sergeant paused from stretching the yellow police tape to take in the scene with a jaundiced eye. It was a mess that was about to become a fucking mess. The barricades had been set up too late, and rubberneckers had overrun the beach and dunes, ruining any clues the sand might have held. Then the barricades had been set up in the wrong places and had to be moved, trapping a matched set of his-and-hers Range Rovers, and the two people were now out of their cars, yelling about important appointments (hairdresser, tennis) and brandishing their cell phones, threatening to call their lawyers.

That wet sound over his shoulder was the shit already hitting the fan. It was the sixteenth of October in Southampton, Long Island, and the town's most notorious resident had just been found murdered in bed.

He heard Lieutenant Braskie's voice. "Sergeant, you