Sapphic Sleuth

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Abstract

‘Sapphic Sleuth’ consists of my novel, *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, and a reflective thesis on the process of and rationale for writing it. The commentary explains the critical-into-creative methodology established to write a novel that leverages detective genre conventions and fluidity to inhabit, subvert, and expand on genre tropes, such as masquerade and the hardboiled wise-guy voice, to recast the lone-wolf sleuth as a queer nun who investigates her imbricated identities in concert with the central crimes. This thesis explores how the novel was informed by a creative reading and analysis of criticism and detective fiction, particularly hardboiled private-eye fiction, with the goal of contributing an original variation on the amateur sleuth narrative. Following examinations of genre and the complex relationship of social identities and cultural institutions in detective fiction, the thesis articulates how amateur sleuth fiction like *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery* exemplifies that relationship. These inquiries converge in the context of craft as I explicate the novel’s aesthetics and the system of poetics devised to queer the investigative sensibility and innovate within genre expectations to achieve thematic and stylistic synthesis. The critical commentary proposes that an application of queer analysis and the foregrounding of queer storylines in crime fiction, as illustrated in *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, can situate a sleuth outside of heteronormative constructs thereby affording her unusual detection abilities such as interpreting, code-switching, passing, and inference – skills particularly relevant to a person at the margins. Through this commentary I argue that a theoretically grounded queer crime fiction practice can create a discourse between new works and canonical texts, underscoring the fluid nature of genre and the vital ways crime fiction can contribute to an expansive Creative Writing practice and pedagogy.
Research Questions

1. To what extent, and in what ways, can an established genre such as detective fiction be made anew? Can the foregrounding of queerness assist in the creative practice of innovating within genre frameworks?

2. In what ways does a character’s sexuality inform their technical procedures and/or praxis as a crime solver in a detective/sleuth narrative? How could queerness shape the overall investigative sensibility of a sleuth novel?

3. How fixed are the formulas and ‘rules’ with a genre project such as amateur sleuth fiction, and how much space is there for figurative language and prose styling within those rules? What craft techniques could help sustain tension and accelerate pace in a sleuth narrative without flattening characters or thinning atmosphere?

4. How are detective/sleuth fiction features, such as masquerade, deception, and revelation, reclaimed and reinterpreted in the lesbian sleuth novel?

5. Can a close engagement with landmark hardboiled crime-fiction texts inform the creative practice of writing gripping lesbian/queer sleuth fiction?

6. Can a sleuth’s social identities (sexual, class, faith) be used to write social comment as well as compelling psychological narrative?
Introduction

The basic characteristics of any good investigator are a plodding nature and infinite patience. Society has inadvertently been grooming women to this end for years.

—PI Kinsey Millhone, *A is for Alibi* by Sue Grafton

A nun and a sleuth have more in common than you’d guess. We both wear black. We hide in plain sight. And, go ahead and try, but you cannot fatigue us. We’re as patient and stubborn as a virus.

—Sister Holiday, *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*

‘If you do the crime, you do the time’, the old adage warns. For me, watching crime dramas was the best part of the week. On Sunday nights during my youth, the PBS television channel aired the *Masterpiece Mystery* programme: detective shows like *Poirot*, *Miss Marple*, and *Prime Suspect*. I found myself deeply engaged by these mysteries and, in turn, by detective fiction; both are formats that dare the audience to lean in and match its wits with the amateur or professional detective. The process and promise of deduction enticed me. As a lesbian who came out on the eve of the new millennium, I was my own amateur sleuth, trying – unsuccessfully – to crack codes, decipher mixed cultural messages, and navigate shifting social norms. When I was closeted, I became skilled in the arts of masquerade and secret-keeping. I tried to be an interpreter of moments and people, reading scenes and reading between the lines. I therefore found succour in the misfits of crime storytelling: the hard-drinking private investigator (PI), the grey-haired spinster who was risible or invisible to the virile police chief, the eccentric gumshoe, and the punctilious inspector, derided for his ‘queer’ praxis, though his peculiarities enhanced his deduction skills. Popular sleuth characters like Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and Miss Marple all possess uniquely magnetic energies within their story worlds – recognising almost
imperceptible patterns ignored by the ‘authorities’, making connections no one else noticed – and I was drawn into their investigative orbits. While markedly distinct, these detectives/sleuths share other common ground: they are all insiders yet outsiders, unmarried, childless, and too easily dismissed by culprits and coppers alike.

Stories by Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle and the subsequent screen adaptations of them ignited my curiosity about other modes of detective storytelling, and thus I read foundational American hardboiled PI stories such as Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1929), Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1939) and *The Long Goodbye* (1953), and Mickey Spillane’s *The Snake* (1964). I admired the quirkiness and laser-beam precision of Agatha Christie’s Poirot, but I was jealous of the hardboiled hero’s brio. The gritty poetry animating the ‘wise-guy’ narration of Chandler’s PI Marlowe captivated me (‘To say goodbye is to die a little’).\(^1\) Spillane’s breakneck narrative speed thrilled me. In my closeted years, a period in which I was terrified that my homophobic community might discover my truth, I read tales of slangy private eyes who said whatever they wanted to say and swaggered on the ‘mean streets’ with a boldness I wished I could access. Even if he was agitated (‘I drove home chewing my lip’), pistol-whipped, or double-crossed, the hardboiled PI character still managed to knee a crook in the face and flip the proverbial finger, exuding a devil-may-care brazenness I desperately wanted to possess. Moreover, gay sex was criminalised in many American states, making me wonder about my own criminality, or, at the very least, if I seemed suspicious to others. The same week that I ‘came out of the closet’ – a phrase that enhanced the theatricality of my queerness – I was sent to a psychiatrist. In the vulnerability of that period, I found solace in the wisecracks, temerity, and cynical quips of the PI loner. These complex characters occupied

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2. Ibid., p. 8.
the body as well as the mind, ready to punch or insult an enemy. As Lee Horsley observes, ‘The hardboiled style is vitalised by his verbal combativeness’. PI Philip Marlowe, for example, arms himself with a gun and witty comebacks – both are important weapons.

The erosion of self-confidence resulting from my internalised homophobia also made me doubt my agency as a creative practitioner. Writing and reading were my passions; they helped to form my identity. But I questioned my core ability to deeply engage with texts beyond mere escape. Nonetheless, I kept at it, returning again and again to my creative practice, trying to scribble my way into the hardscrabble PI world. The hardboiled sleuth’s tireless nerve, even on a doomed quest, was an intellectual and personal refuge then and it continues to serve as the core influence in my narrative method.

The PI’s nuanced bravado is an essential convention in the hardboiled genre, the American response to British detective stories in which investigators usually solved mysteries from a distance. According to Horsley, the traditional British detective is a ‘detached figure, immune from danger; the hardboiled investigator, on the other hand, is a man who is very directly involved in this violent, dishonest, unfragrant world of urban corruption and criminality’. P. D. James offers similar thinking with her assertion that crime writers are heavily influenced by the time and place in which they write, and therefore, the American hardboiled PI had to be as ‘ruthless as the world in which he operates’. Since hardboiled authors were reflecting and commenting on the cities and scenarios which they occupied, the tumult of the 1920s/1930s, including corruption, the Great Depression, and violent gangs were woven into

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American plots in the same way that class structures and issues related to British colonisation figured in the plots of Conan Doyle and Christie.

Aim of the project

Creatively reading and engaging with the culturally reflective and historical aspects of hardboiled fiction, as well as the avenging-angel trope of the wisecracking PI, set me on the course of scaffolding my own crime fiction novel with the intention of creating a fresh interpretation of the hardboiled voice and how to live a duty-bound life in a ‘nasty’ world. My aim was to inhabit and subvert the wise-guy code, importing the familiar convention into a feminist-queer character. I also wanted to expand on another key hardboiled trope, the tense interrelation of place and vocation, injected with the frictions and growing pains of 21st-century identity politics. Thus, in 2014, I conceived *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday*, a crime novel in which I recast the ‘lone wolf’ as a queer, iconoclastic nun named Sister Holiday whose search for redemption and spiritual meaning intertwines with her search for the arsonist/murderer who is targeting her religious community.

To establish the cultural/geographic tensions in the novel, the sleuth protagonist makes a move considered countercultural and regressive by her peers. An erstwhile ‘out’ lesbian when she lived in Brooklyn, Holiday chooses to become celibate Sister Holiday, adopting a new life in a New Orleans convent. I composed the first draft in this way to build a framework within the novel that allows one newly sanctioned and *expanding* North American cultural identity

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(queerness) to overlap with a *constricting* cultural identity/institution (religion/Catholic nun), like two sine waves.7 Despite Sister Holiday’s sincere efforts to take control of her destiny, and the immediate consequences of her abrupt decision to convert, the sleuth fears she may never understand who she is or who she is *meant* to be (‘Look at me. Who am I?’).8 These braided mysteries and anxieties fuel Sister Holiday’s mission – at times myopic – to unmask the arsonist. Embarking on quixotic or inherently dangerous quests is another key feature of the traditional hardboiled tale.

For my critical research into how hardboiled stories operate, I examined the various choices made by Spillane and Hammett, with particular weight on Chandler, to reflect a sleuth’s preoccupation with asserting individual agency in a broken, turbulent world. According to Paul Dawson, ‘to read as a writer is to uncover the evidence of a writer's craft in the construction of a literary work, surmising about the practical choices made from a range of possible alternatives’.9 For my methodological inquiry, I paid close attention to voice and dialogue, looking for evidence of how and when characters speak, verbally spar versus fight physically, and communicate about their interior worlds. I examined the writerly choices made to illustrate the ways in which sleuths isolate themselves as well as distinguish what sleuths *say* versus how they *think*. The sleuth’s words are frequently weaponised, deployed as offensive and defensive mechanisms. Ironic distance, via jokes and wisecracking retorts, and physical distance, such as a private eye living alone, are often complimentary character features in the hardboiled tale.

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7 On page 123 in *River of Fire: My Spiritual Journey* (2019), Sister Helen Prejean writes, ‘In 1965 in the United States we were 180,000 nuns strong. Today we number 60,000, with a median age of seventy-plus and only a tiny trickle of new members entering the community—all of them older now’.
8 *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 305.
The select parallels between a fictional ‘loner’ sleuth and my experience as a formerly invisible (closeted) and now legally recognised affianced lesbian resonate with me, but the process of reading popular hardboiled stories required calibration. This calibration was necessary not because of the craft, which I have always found to be profluent, riveting, profoundly instructive, and devastatingly lyrical, but because of my interpretations of content which I perceived to be sexist, racist, and homophobic. As Philip Marlowe reports in *The Big Sleep*, ‘I slapped her face … I slapped her again … she didn’t mind the slaps’. He repeats the word ‘slap’ four times within the span of two sentences, creating a strong rhythmic effect that communicates an ease with the violence. The cadence also intimates a pleasure in – or fixation with – the actual act of slapping a woman. In the theatre of the hardboiled tale, women were generally boxed into four categories: the victim, the gangster’s moll, the naïve secretary, or the femme fatale – a cunning woman. As Sara Paretsky observes, Dashiell Hammett’s character of Brigid O’Shaughnessy is not only predatory, she is one-dimensional, existing ‘only in the body’. Even for Philip Marlowe, arguably the most self-aware and sentimental of the landmark hardboiled heroes, a female character is usually ‘a loose woman’ or a shady temptress/siren who cannot be trusted. Hardboiled’s female characters, with their largely predictable storylines, exemplify the narrowness of repertoires of femininity. The push-pull tension in my creative practice is undeniable; I am attracted to hardboiled’s stylistic virtuosity and the sleuth’s brash charm, but I am repelled by overt expressions of misogyny, racism, and homophobia. We do not

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read texts in a vacuum. Even when reading solely for pleasure, we still bring the colours and contours of our life experiences to the process of reading(s). Therefore, a queer-feminist reader like myself may feel disconnected from some aspects of traditional hardboiled content.

Understanding cultural/historical contexts and authorial intentions is a crucially important element of actively engaging with any text, and this certainly applies to the ‘sexist thrust’ of a hardboiled novel. Indeed, even novels containing characters who pillory homosexuals and exalt violence against women are not so problematised that they cannot be utilised as highly productive tools within a Creative Writing practice. In fact, what I discovered through my immersion in the sexist- and homophobic-constructed worlds of the early hardboileds was a strong desire to engage with their historical and ideological contexts, attempt to transpose storylines into a contemporary setting, widen the conversation, broaden the scope, and diversify my reading list. Concepts and ideas codified by the hardboiled school, such as person versus persona, the rhetorical power of voice, masquerade, and revelation are fecund territories for the wider intellectual and literary discourse. I was therefore grateful to discover the neo-hardboiled feminist books by Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton that debuted in the 1980s. The plucky female protagonists of their novels – Paretsky’s V.I. Warshawski and Grafton’s Kinsey Millhone – subverted sexist hardboiled tropes while appropriating the PI’s terse style, from deployment of wisecracks and invectives (‘I could outcuss him any day of the week’), to a spare narrative style free of extravagant flourish. Engaging with these novels prompted me to consider alterity as a

15 ‘Many women readers are well aware of the sexist thrust of [Chandler’s] books but still read with pleasure and against the grain his elegant, supple, multivocal style, or styles’. – Stephen Knight, in Crime Fiction since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 120.
potential asset rather than a detriment. Closely reading and expanding on the neo-hardboiled feminist novels gave me a platform to identify and consider the multitudinous benefits of femininity and female intuition as they related to PI work and sleuthing, such as the ‘plodding nature and infinite patience’ of Grafton’s PI Millhone. Similarly, my sleuth, Sister Holiday, is a stubborn shapeshifter who can ‘hide in plain sight’ and leverage deception and high-femme signatures to disguise herself and pass if/when she needs to.

Acknowledging the potential chameleon abilities depicted in the epigraphs to this Introduction was a paradigm shift for me, but although Paretsky’s and Grafton’s hardboiled counter-traditions and wise guy reversals were energising, their feminist PIs (chick dicks) were emphatically straight. I began to wonder: was there space in the crime fiction genre and sleuth subgenre for an out lesbian protagonist? Where were the queer sex scenes? Would the masculine tone and register so prevalent in private dick novels still exist without the expected physical dick? How would a queer femme fatale operate? Through the eyes of a marginal character, what constitutes a crime? What constitutes a heroic act?

With the discovery of Scottish lesbian author Val McDermid’s contemporary crime novels and lesbian detective fiction by North American authors such as Katherine V. Forrest, Barbara Wilson, and Laurie R. King, I had found the lesbian detective content I was craving. These works build on hardboiled conventions and invite readers into intertextual conversations,

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21 ‘Private dick’— colloquial shorthand for ‘private detective’ and ‘private investigator’ (PI) – is used frequently in hardboiled texts themselves as well as the analysis of PI narratives. The feminist incarnation of the term is ‘chick dick’. ‘Dyke dick’ is the lesbian inheritor of the private dick moniker. Of course, all three – private dick, dyke dick, and chick dick – contain suggestive wordplay of their own, which is fertile territory for a self-aware genre author. Sleuth protagonists in novels by Sue Grafton and Katherine V. Forrest, for example, inhabit and often subvert the ‘dick-centric’ PI tropes.
making connections between novels. I explicate these innovations in Chapter One of this thesis. The influential derring-do of Forrest, Wilson, and King’s queer sleuths and ‘dyke dicks’ of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s was followed by later LGBTQ incarnations, such as the Bobbi Logan Mysteries (debuting in 2012) by transgender author Renee James featuring a transwoman amateur sleuth; Stevie Mikayne’s lesbian mysteries led by PI Jillienne Kidd (2014); Cheryl A. Head’s Bury Me When I’m Dead: A Charlie Mack Motown Mystery (2016), a novel in which a black lesbian private eye battles against crime in Detroit as well as her own internalised homophobia; and my own character, Sister Holiday. Chapter Two of this thesis historicises feminist and queer detection fiction in greater detail and situates my sleuth novel within the canonical lineage.

Through my close reading, critical and practical research, and multimodal engagement, I have established a critical-into-creative methodology for my crime fiction. An emphasis on an original ‘voice-driven’ crime fiction experience is the foundation of my narrative method. The narrative voice has been inspired and informed by a close engagement with hardboiled and neo-hardboiled texts, and I strive to innovate the genre with a queer-religious protagonist, a queer thematic centre, and an overall queer investigative sensibility. So much of a sleuth narrative’s appeal is tied to the appeal of the sleuth herself, therefore, I have endeavoured to create a three-dimensional, flawed character in the hardboiled tradition, fuelled by a stubborn desire to solve a riddle and right the wrongs she perceives in the world. I aim to contribute well-drawn, layered queer portrayals in the detective genre that defy the gender binary and illustrate what law and order might look like from a queer perspective. My larger project is to introduce crime fiction

22 Graham Allen’s Intertextuality (The New Critical Idiom), Second Edition (Routledge, 2011) was used as a general reference on the subject of intertextuality.
characters who understand differently the contours of criminality because they were (or are) shadowed by their own alterity, marginalisation, or transgressions – breaking from a prescribed social order.

Another aim in this project was to render the sleuth character in such a way that she has the room to make bad judgements and then use those errors to generate tension and push the narrative forward. ‘Queering’ the narrative furnished many opportunities to blind, challenge, and sidetrack Sister Holiday. Unable to commit fully to an ascetic life, the sleuth is in a perennial state of agitation, and the purgatory is of her own design. Will she stay on the ‘righteous’ track or lose her way? Throughout the novel, I seek to reinvest this defining question in the reader’s mind to deepen reader investment and anxiety.

To plague my protagonist further, I placed her in the oven of New Orleans, a crucible of a city that can feel like a prison or a party, depending your perspective and level of agency. The infested ‘big sordid dirty city’ is another hardboiled trope I hope to reclaim.24 The setting also gives me mouldable craft material to layer narrative pressures, exploit sensory perception, and sink Sister Holiday further into the flames – or threat of flames. Belied by the moniker The Big Easy, New Orleans has a reputation for institutional racism, musical heritage, quirky characters, oppressive heat, and punishing acts of God. Those aspects, including the force majeure of Hurricane Katrina, influence my characters and inform plot. Inextricably linked with New Orleans as a place and character are themes of masquerade and deception.

The themes of masquerade, carnival, and extravagance are essential to a rendering of New Orleans, and they are also woven into Sister Holiday’s identity politics, her sense of performativity, and her detection sensibility. Though her body is covered in tattoos, from her


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jawline to her toes, she often remarks that as a nun she is invisible. Sister Holiday is required to wear gloves and a scarf to conceal her inked skin. Joining a Sisterhood and taking vows of modesty and poverty accelerate her erasure and camouflage on one level, but her spiritual practice brings her closer to herself. Throughout the book, I have placed mirrors in unusual places, for example seeing her distorted visage in the stained glass of the church, to reinforce the sense that the antihero has a complex relationship with her various selves. Try as she might, Sister Holiday cannot escape herself.

My crime fiction method balances genre conventions and inventions. Therefore, the novel should be read as a construction that is informed by detective fiction generally, and, more specifically, by select tropes from hardboiled and neo-hardboiled mysteries. The adaptations of those tropes and original synthesis are intended to innovate within the detective genre. The novel represents an application of pastiche and parody in that it exaggerates select genre hallmarks, such as Rosemary Flynn’s casting as a queer femme fatale and Sister Honour’s embodiment of moral authority and rectitude. While not a wholesale imitation, the novel utilises popular crime fiction/whodunit mechanics: the arson appears on the novel’s first page and the rest of the novel is devoted to an investigation of who started that fire. The novel parodies and subverts hardboiled codes, such as the cynical first-person voice-over and the pacey style free of complex punctuation or grammatical intervention. In a work of 80,000 words, I do no use one semicolon. I strive to balance original lyricism and imaginative prose, explored in depth in Chapter Three, with humour, irony, and intertextuality. For instance, there is a cat named Miss Marple, Mike Hammer is referred to as a ‘dick’, the characters read the Book of Judith, and the protagonist signals to the reader that she is aware of her own role within the sleuth tradition (‘the same damn

25 ‘Every hardboiled PI, even Mike Hammer, that dick, has an office.’ The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 49.
Chandler novels I read and re-read’). The wisecracking wit expected in an iconic hardboiler is present throughout the novel. The joking retorts and wisecracks serve multiple purposes. Talking back and cynical quips give Sister Holiday a form of power when she confronts authority figures like Sister Honour and Detective Grogran. Furthermore, Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones argue that, for the female PI, the wisecrack is a means of bucking conventional codes of feminine conduct: ‘Such deflection takes place when characters “crack wise” within such novels; it also occurs when authors use tough talk to respond to the hard-boiled tradition itself’. This notion of authorial response is key to my larger project of contributing a fresh ‘voice’ to the evolving detective genre.

The ironic tone and dark humour (‘I’ll make you a saint if you drive fast’), including the group reading of the Book of Judith, which celebrates a man’s beheading, and sequences with the nuns dancing in the Evangeline Ballroom and singing on the school bus also introduce elements of Camp. I embrace Camp as both a nod to queer culture and part of a stylistic sensibility that ‘seeks to challenge’. Susan Sontag’s analysis in Notes on Camp proved to be a useful reference during my craft process. Sontag contends that ‘Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon’. Camp centres aesthetics – style and tone – to create an environment where the impossible can be experienced as possible. In art (literature, TV, and film), nuns have long been featured in Camp and campy portrayals; consider the pop-culture staples like Sister Act, The Sound of Music, and The Flying

Nun, and the Sister’s habit as a common Halloween costume. To make the impossible or unlikely appear possible, I have learnt that consistency and three-dimensionality are keys to creating a signature style in which readers can find purchase. The first-person perspective, variation of the prose line, the use of fragments and evocative figurative language, and the intermittent threading of prayer and invective contribute to the novel’s line-by-line style which, in turn, contributes to the overall ethos.

The critical and practical research I have conducted varied in nature, ranging from creatively reading and analysing more than one hundred books through a feminist and queer deconstructionist lens, to shadowing musicians and high school teachers, to watching dozens of detective programmes, to riding along in a police car. The research was united by the goal of bringing plausibility, realistic dialogue, and authoritative commentary to the project. For example, in 2017, I participated in the ‘Ride-Along’ programme with Northampton Police Officers, accompanying a local sergeant on a six-hour shift, riding in his police cruiser, touring the police department, and interviewing the Police Chief. In 2019, I attended an investigative procedure workshop in Northampton, Massachusetts, with Detective Sergeant Vic Caputo of the Northampton Police Department. In 2018 and 2019, I collaborated with Attorney Gratienne Sienna Baskin, requesting her legal insight on the development of courtroom interactions and arrest scenes in my novel. I also interviewed the Easthampton, Massachusetts, Fire Captain Sandy Krauss, the first female to serve in the Captain’s post. My written notes and photographs from the Ride-Along programme, and the interviews with Caputo, Krauss, and Baskin, provided

31 The intersection of Camp, queerness, and religious imagery can be observed in work by The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, an activist and performance troupe founded in San Francisco in 1979. According to the troupe’s website, this Order uses drag, religious imagery, ‘humor and irreverent wit to expose the forces of bigotry, complacency and guilt that chain the human spirit’. <https://www.thesisters.org>
32 Northampton Police Department Ride-Along Program <https://www.northamptonpd.com/community-services/ride-along-program.html>
essential insight that helped me correct inaccuracies in the early-draft depictions of the police/fire department investigative procedure and legal system. Elements such as forensics, the handling of evidence, crime scene procedures, Miranda Warnings, interview practice, and court operations were reviewed, modified, and revised for veracity in the final draft. For example, two pages of dialogue mentioning fingerprinting students in Draft Twelve was deleted. I have also joined the Writers’ Police Academy, an organization based in New Jersey that offers hands-on training events for writers, with a specific focus on the tools and procedures used for solving the crime of murder. Writers’ Police Academy offers training on Sirchie, the crime-scene investigation technology.

To enhance the theme of musicality in the novel, I shadowed two guitar players, Adam Dunetz of Northampton, Massachusetts, and Ben Richter of Los Angeles, California, spending time with them backstage and in their music studios. As with the Police Ride-Along, the musical engagements provided opportunities to carve personal pathways into the world of the novel, which helped me gain more accurate and more intuitive understandings of the pertinent topics. My aim is to write with sensorial immersion and emotional depth and infuse a sense of immediacy into Sister Holiday's punk-rock past and her harmonious ‘narrative present’. Jody Hobbs Hesler articulates how point-of-view can generate ‘much of the narrative tension in the story, but, of course, it is not the only delivery system’.33 In my narrative method, I have devised ways of illuminating Sister Holiday’s secret longings – including her desire to reconnect with the physical intensity of playing the electric guitar, which was like ‘riding a tsunami’ – to make the subterranean pining evident to the reader.34

34 The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 102.
Multimodal engagements and interventions can provide further evidence that the detective genre is a vibrant and evolving genre. From *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, a reference to Sherlock Holmes, to the television PI character Veronica Mars calling her father ‘Philp Marlowe’, sleuth storytelling has proven to be a remarkably fertile ground for intertextual and cross-platform conversations. This suggests that, within familiar territory, readers and viewers want to be surprised by genre mutation, variation, recombination, and satisfying twists. My Creative Writing ambition is to innovate in such a manner, constructing a mystery fiction series that consists of more than two instalments and converses with germane hardboiled/mystery texts and tropes to widen the aperture for readers. Because the premise and the narrative predicaments at the core of my sleuth series would need to be compelling to keep readers wanting more, I believe that the evolving role of the Catholic church in the United States, of which I was an active member for twenty years, contribute to the non-static conditions needed for micro tensions and an ongoing macro story arc.

In addition to being a practicing Catholic for two decades, I also attended Catholic school for eight years, and the teachers who had the most enduring influence on me were nuns. I often meditated on the contradictory notion that nuns were the most fully realised examples of feminists I have ever encountered and yet they were, technically, servants to God and unequal with men. The nuns I knew in my youth were self-reliant and strong women, unencumbered by modern woes. They chose poverty, obedience, chastity, and the willing abnegation of conveniences in order to share their love with all of humanity, rather than one partner or spouse.

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35 The popular US television series *Veronica Mars* imports keystone hardboiled tropes into a teenage mystery series with micro/macro arcs and California noir/dark comedy. The series imitates and expands on hardboiled signatures, giving the characters their own private detective agency and utilizing a Philip Marlowe-esque voice-over. In Season One, Veronica Mars, played by the actress Kristen Bell, calls her father ‘Philip Marlowe’, even though she is more of Marlowe’s cynical and complex PI inheritor.
The Sisters-Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the Order in my Pennsylvania hometown, Scranton, was instrumental in teaching literacy to the wives and daughters of anthracite coal miners in the 1900s.

Most religious women I now know are similarly service-oriented – energetically dedicated to social change. Many Sisters, like ‘The Nuns on the Bus’, are intimately engaged in purpose-driven lives, addressing racial injustice, tirelessly caring for the infirm, feeding the poor, advocating for healthcare policy changes, and working to improve shelter conditions for asylum seekers at the USA/Mexico border. Sister Helen Prejean, for instance, is an anti-death penalty advocate who is fiercely committed to restorative justice. She communicates openly about her spiritual practice, sexuality, and individuation within the context of Sisterhood. Sister Helen Prejean chronicles her spiritual journey with a distinctly passionate and luminous voice (‘The fire, the mystic union, is God’s pure gift’). She admits she is ‘haunted by God’.36 For as solvent, creative, unique, and inspiring as nuns are in North America, they are still, as a group, not equal to men within the patriarchal ecclesiastical hierarchy. Nuns rank below priests and they cannot lead worship services. While the word ‘nuns’, in the strictest sense, refers to women who are cloistered and contemplative, ‘Sisters’ are active in the working world, engaged in the larger community, often on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised.37 Nuns and Sisters have become so colloquially intertwined that these words are used as synonyms in and outside the church and they will be used synonymously in this critical commentary and the novel. With regard to political and cultural issues, Sisters do not have a homogenous voice, especially when it comes to LGBTQ rights, in relation to which a diversity of opinions is shared.38 I plan to use rich

38 Ibid., p. 78.
juxtapositions like these to shape my unconventional sleuth. Sister Holiday must come alive to readers as a credible character, not a circus sideshow. I attempt to strike this balance by incorporating sombre and sober scenes to humanise Sister Holiday and her world. I was conscious of how the sleuth acts, speaks, and thinks. I was equally aware of the need to instruct readers on the distance between what she says and what she thinks, how, like a traditional hardboiled PI, wisecracks and physical actions are often deployed as protective amour against emotional instability. For example, Sister Holiday responds to the brutal rape of her brother by stalking and attacking the perpetrators. She reacts to the violent death of Toni by moving from Brooklyn and joining the convent, trying to erase her ‘old self’. In response to her student, Prince Dempsey, who disrupts music class with a menacing question, ‘What’s the most painful way to die?’, Sister Holiday responds, ‘being your music teacher’.39

To bring rigour and originality to the depictions of women religious and religious services, I returned to Catholic Mass in Scranton, Pennsylvania, paying attention to the subtleties and sensorial textures, such as the pungent sandalwood incense and unforgiving cold wood of the church pews. I read journalism about and memoirs by women religious, such as Sister Helen Prejean. As an erstwhile student of nuns, at Scranton’s Saint Claire’s School and Saint Paul’s School, I reflected on, reconstructed, and interpreted my own encounters with nuns – using memory as craft material.

My goal is to leverage the aforementioned critical and practical research, in combination with imaginative interpretations, to create an expansive, layered hardboiled-inspired sleuth text. In the thesis, I examine how queer mysteries, such as The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, are uniquely positioned to act as metaphors for the desire to understand our roles and to

find (or make) meaning in the world as societal attitudes shift. I hope to do this by introducing complex characters who, as they search for the arsonist-murderer, are all presented with opportunities to interrogate themselves. Sister Holiday, as she looks from the outside in, offers commentary on the ever-changing customs of contemporary life and romance. In the system of poetics that I am devising, character development and cross-fertilised plot points will help exploit blind spots and discriminations, and amplify the tensions between one’s past and present, between vocational identity and sexual identity, between storyteller and the story, and between healer and sinner.
Chapter One: Genre

The body of a swimming coach washes up on the shore of a sleepy Maine town. A ransom note, speckled with blood, rests on the blue sheet of an empty crib. A grand jewel is lifted from the old museum. While the aforementioned examples signal different crimes, they share common ground as the potential beginnings of detective fiction stories. Like many forms of literature, the detective fiction category is not monolithic; it can be as manifold as the authors contributing to the genre and the novels revolving around crime and characters (erudite detectives, mercenary PIs, spinster sleuths, even crime-solving cats) who try to piece together clues. 40 Cozy mysteries, forensic investigations, and locked-room puzzlers are a few forms of detective fiction readily available at libraries and bookshops. Many detective novels do not fit neatly into one restrictive box or another; they often assemble, reference, and include hallmarks of various categories. I argue that this fluidity and dynamism within the genre – the writ-large understanding that myriad styles can be found on one bookshelf marked ‘detective fiction’ – also presents craft-related challenges and opportunities for creative writers like myself.

In this chapter, I investigate genre with the goal of scrutinising the mechanics of and historical approaches to detective fiction. In the first section, I dissect genre with the following questions in mind: What is the DNA of the detective fiction genre? What are the rules of the genre and how closely must I follow those rules? How many rules can I break in a queer sleuth narrative? Within expected formulas, where are the opportunities to innovate and intervene? These inquiries fuel my research and creative craft, and thus I also utilise the first section of this chapter to establish an understanding of genre and how an engagement with genre is a vitally

40 Rita Mae Brown introduced her sleuthing cat characters, Mrs. Murphy and Pewter, along with the dog Tee Tucker in the mystery *The Purrfect Murder*. The book, ‘co-authored’ by Brown and her cat, Sneakie Pie Brown, was published by Random House in 2009.
productive endeavour. In the second and third sections of this chapter, I research narrative
devices commonly found within Golden Age (otherwise known as ‘classic’) and hardboiled
detective fiction schools, respectively, exploring how an understanding of these devices adds
rigour to my drafting and research processes and can illuminate strategies that can be used for
queer sleuth storytelling.

The inherent variety within detective fiction calls for a thorough examination of genre
and a subsequent explanation of how this analysis augments my creative method. Detective
fiction is sometimes referred to as a ‘whodunit’, a narrative that conventionally anchors the genre
in a question: who committed the crime? Tzvetan Todorov takes this notion further, suggesting
that the whodunit consists of two stories: ‘the story of the crime and the story of the
investigation’. In Talking About Detective Fiction, P. D. James distinguishes detective fiction
from other types of literature containing a mysterious crime because the genre’s conventions,
primarily the detective who ‘comes in like an avenging deity’ to solve the crime. While these
observations are largely true, there is room for vast interpretation within the genre, as evinced by
the heterogeneity within the detective fiction landscape. In Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction
Writer: The Reworking of a Popular Genre, Jackie Shead points to the ‘inverted’ detective story
in which, unlike a whodunit, the criminal is revealed early in the novel and the story reads more
like a willshecatchhim, a play on the whodunit contraction. Shead also addresses the ‘clue
puzzle’, such as in Agatha Christie’s A.B.C. Murders (1936), in which an unlikely scenario with

41 ‘In 1930, Donald Gordon, a book reviewer for News of Books, needed to come up with something to say about a
rather unremarkable mystery novel called Half-Mast Murder. “A satisfactory whodunit”, he wrote’.
44 Jackie Shead, Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer: The Reworking of a Popular Genre (New York:
rules is presented, as in a game or sport, hereby inviting the reader to compete with the sleuth and solve the mystery first.\textsuperscript{45} The examples by James and Shead point to the multifariousness of the genre and inspired me to take imaginative risks with the style and themes of my sleuth narrative.

In Harpham and Abrams’s \textit{Glossary of Literary Terms}, genre denotes ‘types or classes’ of literature. According to the authors, ‘through the Renaissance and much of the eighteenth century, the recognised genres or poetic kinds as they were then called were widely thought to be fixed literary types, somewhat like species in the biological order of nature’.\textsuperscript{46} With this concept of classification in mind, it is reasonable to consider genre a ‘type’ of literature that can be identified by prominent features, arguably in the way that specific markings on feathers might prove helpful during an ornithologist’s taxonomy. The word ‘order’, however, which also figures in Harpham and Abrams’s definition, illuminates P. D. James’s scholarship on the subject of genre. James emphasises that what makes the detective fiction genre identifiable and different from other works of crime fiction are the detective novel’s ‘organised structure and recognisable conventions’.\textsuperscript{47} In other words, following a familiar formula may assist in both the creation and the classification of a work as detective fiction.

There is often quite subtle gradation between detective novels such that the differentiation is not always clear. For example, a whodunit may also contain a nested willshecatchhim and elements of the clue puzzle structures that I illustrated earlier. Nonetheless, the detective genre’s prescription includes an established set of ingredients. A detective story should include a central crime (a puzzle to be solved); a detective figure or a detection team;

clues about the crime in question; red herrings; and a narrative resolution of some kind. Therefore, a mystery, as it relates to detective fiction, means a riddle ‘to solve’ or ‘to be solved’ within the narrative framework of the book. I assert that the infinitive marker of the word ‘to’ is important as it solidifies the detective story’s deontic nature, meaning that a question is obliged to be answered. There is an expectation inherent in a detective fiction tale. The detective fiction genre’s premise is that the narrative is a problem-solving tool that animates the story’s action. Readers of the detective genre, in general, don’t want to be passive consumers; rather, genre enthusiasts expect to roll up their sleeves, synthesise, find the through line, and reject red herrings in concert with the sleuth. And while a cosy literary puzzle about a sassy feline crimefighter could not be more different in tone to the brutality of torture in the Swedish Kurt Wallander novels, both are ultimately concerned with narrative resolutions that feel satisfactory according to the rules set forth by the respective authors of sleuth-oriented projects.

Accepting Harpham and Abrams’s premise that genre is a type of literature, and applying it to P. D. James’s assertion that a familiar formula helps to distinguish the detective fiction type from other crime fiction types, it is therefore interesting to explore Richard Dyer’s observation that genre is a type that also describes a type of art. In his book Pastiche, Dyer presents the idea that genre is both an object (a noun) and a modifier (an adjective, as in the phrase ‘genre fiction’). As it relates to my writing practice, Dyer’s application of genre as both a type and a description of type provided me with useful tools to analyse private eye novels such as Raymond Chandler’s The Big Sleep (1939) and Sara Gran’s Claire DeWitt and the City of the Dead (2011),

48 In Chapter Three of this thesis, I explore Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s influential concept of the ‘paranoid reader’ apropos of detective fiction as well as my writing practice. In my novel, I explore ways to keep the reader engaged and alert, searching for patterns that may prove to be useful clues (for example, Sister Augustine’s frequent prayer vigils at the shrine) versus patterns that are designed to mislead.
probing how these works both align with and/or stray from detective fiction’s recognisable conventions. According to Neil McCaw, ‘Reading is seen as a form of creative expression rather than a narrow prescription, a means of examining texts at a range of levels (intellectual/emotional/psychological/cultural etc.).’ Creatively reading the aforementioned books – reading for comprehension, analysis, and interpretation – gave me a platform on which I could re-locate certain ideas in an attempt to create new paradigms. The insights gleaned from my creative reading were then used to negotiate voice, conflict, and the balance of action to first-person interiority in my novel. I invested in this aspect of the novel’s construction in order to lead readers on a journey through the inner and outer worlds of the viewpoint character. The exterior and interior need to stay balanced to keep the narrative moving forward for the reader. Propulsion – movement toward the solution of the puzzle – is a general expectation in works of detective genre, especially when the story opens with danger or the threat of danger.

When analysing and engaging with influential genre texts, Richard Dyer also insists that familiarity is one aspect of how readers contextualise genre, but that likeness and familiarity are neither definitive nor instructive about art’s purpose. Dyer raises the issue of ‘purpose’:

Genres are groupings of works recognised as being alike. A symphony or sonnet or Western is like other symphonies, sonnets or Westerns and so genre production is a species of evident imitation, of making and receiving something like something else because it is like something else. However, a straight genre work is not purposefully signalling the fact of imitation.

My reading of Dyer’s theory is that an artist can utilise the constructs and framework of genre not to copy or plagiarise outright, but rather to offer a new perspective, deliver a new twist, or tell a new story. Dyer further explains that a production of a genre work means a knowing

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‘imitation’ of an art form for a strategic purpose. He also suggests that pastiche – artwork rooted in imitation – is a fruitful framework for analysing genre that contains an assemblage or ‘collage’. In this regard, the concept of pastiche in artmaking informs my creative process because my ambition is to learn from historical traditions, genre inhabitation, and textual subversion to examine both ‘how categories of text shift in an attempt to establish a framework within which all texts can be contained’, as Neil McCaw has observed, and also ‘the shifting nature of these genre categories’ in order to contribute fresh ideas to the literary discourse.52 I aimed to write a genre-recognisable sleuth narrative whilst also expanding the possibilities of the category. To that end, I rooted my story in a whodunit (who is the arsonist and murderer?), but I thickened the mystery with Sister Holiday’s characterisation and unlikely conversion story. The novel’s style is also a reference to hardboiled, with shotgun lyricism interspersed with prayer (‘Sirens wailed, and I felt the sound hard, like punches in the back of the heart. Hail Mary, Mother Mary, full of grace. Hail Eve.’).53 My aim in the novel was to compose three subplots – Toni’s fiery death, a possible romance with Rosemary, the novice-into-permanent vow uncertainty – with tectonic movement so they interact with the central plot but also quiver with their own shadow inquiries: what is forgiveness, what is healing, who can be a hero, and – the book’s metanarrative – what happens when you lose control of the story you tell about yourself? Holiday was an out lesbian, and now she is a nun, Sister Holiday, so is she still the ‘same person’?

In my application, ‘identity’ is an aspect of personhood that is negotiated by the novel’s characters as they try to understand if an identity is a fixed boundary or if it is more like a nexus

of distinguishing features and the interplay of those features. In the novel, identity is something that is perceived to be shaped, iterated, maintained, found, and or lost, as seen in the exchange in which Audrey doubts that Sister Holiday can still identify as a lesbian because she is celibate. Similarly, Detective Grogan identifies Sister Augustine as a rare figure in modern times – a ‘pro’ – because of the many decades she has served as Saint Sebastian’s principal. In these two examples, identity is a kind of invented or constructed performance. This dovetails with Judith Butler’s theory of performativity that emphasises the ‘reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains’.54 Private-eye work and religious rituals are also contingent on speech and actions to codify or consecrate them, other types of performativity.

Beyond embracing the whodunit model, my novel is also a knowing assemblage of select archetypal hardboiled tropes, such as the cynical first-person point-of-view to mask inner fragility. But my goal was to add unexpected layers, such as the sleuth’s idiosyncratic lesbian identity, her contradictory tattoos which allow readers to try to ‘read’ and decode the character and her countercultural decision to become a Catholic Sister. Her tattoos are worn / displayed as visual cues (evidence) of her toughness and impetuousness as well as her faith. I have also included Golden Age detective elements in my narrative method, including an oddball pairing / foil, similar to that of Watson and Holmes. I dissect these signatures in greater detail in the second and third sections this chapter.

Additionally, the crime in my novel is serial arson and subsequent murders. And though my novel presents a mystery to be solved, thus necessitating propulsive action by the characters and reader, the spiritual nature of the protagonist, an unconventional nun, and the setting, a Catholic school, make it acceptable, even logical, for characters to disrupt time to reflect on the

past and meditate on grief, identity, and shifting social codes. For a character like Sister Holiday, spirituality and introspection are linked to her thought process which, in turn, influence her sleuthing. Readers see Sister Holiday alone in her bedroom and kneeling in the wooden pew of the church as she tries to focus on clues so she can ‘crack this case wide open’ and try to resolve the conflicts (her own and the arson/murder).55 The scenes that occur in the convent kitchen, school, and church – narratively framed by Holiday’s inner monologue, constructed for the reader through reflections – foreground the complexities of duty and sisterhood. A hard-but-meditative character is another hardboiled conceit on which I attempt to build and extend. Grant Tracy points to the authorial treatment of interiority as a crucially important feature of reading Raymond Chandler’s work as a ‘landscape of insight’. Tracy writes, ‘There is a lot of gunplay, sudden violence in Chandler’s pulp stories, but in the six novels that follow Marlowe’s debut, he never kills anyone. Instead, action is downplayed in favor of attitude’. The idea proved to be a useful insight in my praxis as I attempted to create a thorny, hot tempered, and reactionary sleuth who was simultaneously contemplative and self-aware.

Another ambition for this Ph.D. was to blend stylistic experimentation within expectation, a mix evident in hardboiled-inspired texts, such as the oneiric sequences of Sara Gran’s pioneering New Orleans sleuth fiction.56 In my novel, stylistic experimentation is exemplified in the word choice, context-sensitive syntax, repetition, and lyricism (‘The abdominal aorta pumps as the heart beats, like a secret heart. But every heart is a secret’).57 A delicate balance must be achieved between expressive language, description, and action, and,

56 ‘That night I dreamed I was back in New Orleans. I hadn’t been there in ten years. But now, in my dream, it was during the flood’: Sara Gran, Claire Dewitt and the City of the Dead (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), p. 1. It is also interesting to note how this opening line by Gran echoes a classic, dream-related first line – ‘Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again’ – in Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier. In both novels, dreams and illusions suggest the psychological complexities of the characters and influence narrative developments.
ultimately, clues. Combined with the grinding work of rubber-meets-the-road sleuthing, the language styling must serve to push the sleuth story along. If poetic language is to work in the detective fiction genre, it has to be of service to the larger narrative project. In order that my poeticism (‘Light pounded my eyelids … Absolution. A portent of my future self’) served voice-driven narrative and plot, I sought to make the syntax tensile and tight, and expressive in ways that reflect Sister Holiday’s viewpoint.\(^58\) The figurative language and symbolism evolve associatively as the story unfolds, often evoking heat, fire, sweat, agitation, and blood. Even my title, *The Scorched Cross*, is poetic in the sense that it points to the emotional heart and metanarrative of the novel – what happens when you get burned? what happens when you lose control of the story you tell yourself about your life? – rather than functioning as a simplistic label.\(^59\) Chandler’s hardboiled novels apply figurative language with similar means. In *The Long Goodbye*, after noticing a very attractive woman in a hotel bar, Philip Marlowe comments that the woman looks as ‘remote and clear as mountain water’.\(^60\) The variance between ‘remote’ and ‘clear’ supply important information about Marlowe’s unique mindset.

In another familiar trope of detective fiction, the problem-solvers often have enemies of their own and problems of their own besides the central crime. In my book, Investigator Magnolia Riveaux and Sister Holiday are both depictions of an anti-hero, and they both wrestle with external and internal adversarial forces. They both have weaknesses similar to those of Sherlock Holmes (use of cocaine and opium) and Philip Marlowe (taste for booze as well as trouble). Riveaux is addicted to opioids and painkillers and wants, paradoxically, to be more

\(^58\) Ibid., p. 133.
\(^59\) Raymond Chandler’s titles, such as *The Big Sleep* (1939), also operate on multiple levels. ‘The big sleep’ is a metaphor for death but readers can also infer that, even in a seedy crime-ridden city, the act of murder is indeed ‘big’. As such, it is taken seriously by the protagonist.
present as well as to erase herself. Holiday has a hard time letting go of her own story and her identifications with her addictions. Without the disruptions of her old life and the perennial sense of mayhem that defined her, she asks herself and the reader, ‘Who am I?’.

As I have attempted to illustrate, genre is fluid, alternating between commonly recognised conventions and variations (whether of form or of tone) in individual instances of the genre. This is not dissimilar to the diversity of approaches found within traditional poetic forms, namely villanelles and sonnets. Diction, syntax, rhythm, musicality, parallel construction, and other strategic decisions can help a writer to create uniquely engaging reader experiences despite fixed rules of the form. While literary critics like Edmund Wilson dismissed detective fiction rules as a ‘code’ and ‘custom which results in the concealment of the pointlessness of a good deal of this fiction’ – I argue that it is precisely the formulaic nature of the detective narrative that appeals to readers who are eager to experience the unknown within the known. The creative practice implications are stimulating. In my poetry writing practice, I find utility in constraints. It can be a generative writing exercise to construct a traditional sonnet about ‘love’ or ‘death’ that succeeds in furnishing a new viewpoint, and I believe that detective fiction, arguably an overexposed category, presents the same creative dare to the novelist.

T. S. Eliot was one of the ‘detective fiction genre’s most passionate and discerning readers’, according to Paul Grimstad. Grimstad explains Eliot’s position in his New Yorker

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62 Ibid., p. 301.
63 Edmund Wilson, ‘Why Do People Read Detective Stories’? The New Yorker (1944) [https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1944/10/14/why-do-people-read-detective-stories] [accessed 2 April 2017] (para. 3 of 5)
64 I am the author of two books of poetry, Scranton Lace (Clemson University Press, 2018) and Girls Like You, (Clemson University Press, 2015), and the pamphlet/chapbook, I Would Ruby If I Could (Factory Hollow Press, 2013). My fourth collection, Bandit/Queen: The Runaway Story of Belle Starr, is a true-crime poetry project inspired by the notorious Wild West outlaw Belle Starr. Bandit/Queen is under contract with Clemson University Press, scheduled for publication in 2021.
article ‘What Makes Great Detective Fiction, According to T. S. Eliot’: ‘Good detective fiction tempered the passion and pursuit of melodrama with the “beauty of a mathematical problem”’.65 Like Eliot, I appreciate the formal constraints of the genre, viewing them as inspiring rather than limiting. A rule or formula puts pressure on the writer to deliver a surprise of some ilk. This is similar to the way in which a maths problem can possess ‘beauty’; the act of solving it or attempting to solve it is in itself a frisson. With restrictions in place, every calculation by the sleuth is observed and weighed. For instance, in my novel, convention meets variation in the presentation of my spinster sleuth character. In Agatha Christie’s Marple mysteries, elderly but savvy Miss Marple capitalises on the cultural associations of the spinster – meddling, socially invisible, and dismissed – and uses these to make her an effective sleuth as she eavesdrops and extracts critical information from witnesses. My lesbian character depends on and upends cultural associations in a similar way. As a nun and a teacher, students ‘looked right through her’, but she also exploits her otherness to give her a sleuthing edge.66

The Great Detectives and The Golden Age

When I began drafting my novel, I knew that I wanted to write a mystery in which a crime occurs at the start of the book and readers – in concert with the sleuth – must follow the clues to deduce the identity of the perpetrator. I also knew that I wanted my sleuth to be unconventional in more ways than one: she is a sardonic, tattooed lesbian nun named Sister Holiday who cracks the case of a serial arsonist but fails to unlock the personal riddles that nag her. I wanted my nun-

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sleuth to possess the street-smart pluck and beguiling cynicism of Philip Marlowe, the private
eye (‘eye’ acting as the vocalisation of ‘I’ for ‘investigator’) who typified the hardboiled mystery
subgenre popularised in the United States from approximately 1910 to 1950. I wanted the
protagonist to be an amateur – a newbie in more ways than one – but I also introduce the device
of a licensed PI, a common fixture in hardboiled stories, with the invitation by Maggie Riveaux
to join her firm. I also wanted to situate Sister Holiday in an odd-couple detection team with a
foil who accentuates her complexities, the way Dr John Watson provides a rich contrast to
Sherlock Holmes. This is a recipe often found in the earliest detective tales and their Golden Age
successors (popular during the ‘two decades between the First and Second World Wars’).

Early period mysteries, Golden Age, and hardboiled-inspired subgenres offer creative
writers useful case studies in conflict, suspense, and character development. The craft elements
of Golden Age novels, sometimes referred to as armchair detective novels, that are useful for my
practice are the notions of teamwork and the tenets of fair play (engineering a tale in such a way
that a reader can solve a puzzle by examining clues using logical deduction). I will now explain
my relationship to the early whodunits and Golden Age landmarks and how they informed my
process, ultimately leading me to conceive a crime novel with a distinct first-person hardboiled
narration style that is also influenced by traditional crime-fiction attributes.

The classic detective subgenre began with stories by Edgar Allan Poe (The Murders in
the Rue Morgue, 1841), Charles Dickens (Bleak House, 1852), Émile Gaboriau (L’Affaire
Lerouge, 1866), Wilkie Collins (The Moonstone, 1868), and the subgenre was further

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67 Investigator Riveaux tells Sister Holiday that she has been fired from the fire department and has applied for her
official private-eye license. Riveaux then says, “you can join my team. Magnolia Riveaux & Sister Holiday, Private
Eyes”. Sister Holiday equivocates in response, offering an ambiguous quip. The Scorched Cross: Sister Holiday
Mystery, p. 314.
popularised by authors Arthur Conan Doyle (A Study in Scarlet, 1887), Agatha Christie (The Mysterious Affair at Styles, 1920), and Dorothy L. Sayers (Gaudy Night, 1936). The early whodunits feature crimes such as a theft, murder, or kidnapping, and a specific, known environment, such as a school, train, neighbourhood, or village. The investigative figure is usually brilliant and eccentric, as characterised in Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and Christie’s Hercule Poirot. The suspects are often found within a finite group and occupy the same space, or at the very least are not strangers. Suspects are often introduced towards the beginning of the novel. In my book, the crime occurs on page one (the fire), and the setting is a high school with a correlating church, convent, and rectory. In addition to Fire Investigator Riveaux and the Homicide Squad (Sergeant Decker and Detective Grogan), most of the suspects are introduced early. In Chapter Three the reader meets Prince Dempsey, Sisters Augustine, Honour, and Theresa, Rosemary Flynn, Bernard Gregory, and John Vander Kitt. Each suspect has the opportunity and proximity to commit the crime.

In the classic detective mode, the protagonist can be an informal sleuth, professional detective, or private investigator who, by close observation of the evidence or by using a process of methodical establishment of facts, solves the mystery. Notable in this regard are the clever investigators created by John Dickson Carr, G. K. Chesterton, Agatha Christie, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, P. D. James, and one of the forefathers of the genre, Edgar Allan Poe. In his story, The Murders in the Rue Morgue, one of the earliest detective stories (published in 1841), the movements of quirky Paris native C. August Dupin are chronicled by his friend, an unnamed narrator of the story.69 According to David Van Leer, Poe’s The Murders in the Rue Morgue established many genre tropes that would become common

elements in mystery fiction: the eccentric and clever detective; the bumbling constabulary; and
the first-person narration by a personal friend. The detective’s peculiarities come into sharp focus
in contrast to his foils, a ‘sympathetic but naïve narrator’ and an ‘unsympathetic professional
investigator’. The countertype helps to cement character complexity and highlight the
distinctive temperament of the protagonist, often unearthing sublimated ideas that the reader
should learn. The friction of a foil in the form of Investigator Riveaux is an important element
in my novel. After a car chase, Riveaux teases out a piece of revealing – and damning –
information from Sister Holiday.

‘I think you like this. The chase.’
‘Naw. I want to help,’ I lied. Of course I liked it. Not only the chase but the violence. Fire slithering back to
life after you were sure it was extinguished. I liked digging in the trash.

In this scene, it is Riveaux’s suggestion that forces Holiday to admit to herself – and to the reader
– that she ‘likes’ violence and ‘digging in the trash’. This contributes to narrative experience by
showing the reader that temptation lives just under the surface. Even though Sister Holiday is
now on ‘the righteous path’, deep down she is still, at least partially, a ‘monster(s)’. Writing
dialogue that runs parallel to the fault lines of the foil can add character contour and offer the
reader more purchase on a character’s inner tumult.

A study of the great detectives and Golden Age texts also reveals that female authors
have been making notable contributions since the genre’s inception. Metta Victoria Fuller Victor
(born in 1831) was a prolific ‘dime novel’ author who covered diverse subjects in her crime
stories. Her book The Dead Letter was published in 1866 under the pseudonym Seeley Regester,

70 David Van Leer, Detecting Truth: The World of the Dupin Tales, ed. by Kenneth Silverman (Cambridge:
71 M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 7th Edn (Boston: Heinle & Heinle,
72 The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 150.
73 Ibid., p. 201.
and it is commonly believed to be the first full-length American detective novel.\textsuperscript{74} It is also the first female-authored detective novel. \textit{The Dead Letter} introduces new kinds of problem-solving skills, such as reading people or reading ‘character’, and new narrative environments, such as the domestic, to the realm of detective work.

Another early female influencer in the detective fiction genre is Anna Katherine Greene (born in 1846), who wrote \textit{The Levinworth Case}, the first American fiction series about a police detective. Her 1897 novel \textit{That Affair Next Door} introduced the first American female detective in the genre, Amelia Butterworth.\textsuperscript{75} Amelia is an amateur sleuth who is equal parts nosy, determined, opinionated, and impatient (‘I could not resist the temptation of leaving my bed and taking a peep’).\textsuperscript{76} These nervy traits are handy for the sleuth, and these characteristics appear in later incarnations of the spinster sleuth and plucky lass characters popularised by Agatha Christie. In Christie’s \textit{The Man in the Brown Suit} (1924), readers meet Anne Beddingfeld, a ‘bright sort of girl’, a young woman with an appetite for adventure.\textsuperscript{77} After the death of her father, a famous archeologist, the newly orphaned Anne leaves the safe harbor of home and dives head first into a mystery she is determined to solve. While she does marry at the end of the novel, Beddingfeld was a baseline reference for crafting Sister Holiday insofar as her intrepid spirit colours her sleuthing methods (‘I searched diligently’) and her direct-address narration style (‘Everybody has been at me, right and left, to write this story’).\textsuperscript{78}

Another quality shared by amateur unmarried female sleuths such as Marple, Butterworth and Beddingfeld, is the utilisation of available resources such as common sense rather than

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{74} Metta Victoria Fuller Victor, \textit{The Dead Letter} (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2007)
  \item \textsuperscript{76} Anna Katharine Green, \textit{That Affair Next Door} (1897) (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 11.
  \item \textsuperscript{77} Agatha Christie, \textit{The Man in the Brown Suit} (London: The Bodley Head, 1924), p. 28.
  \item \textsuperscript{78} Ibid., pp. 6, 7.
\end{itemize}
police acumen. Similarly, Sister Holiday pairs intuition – for better or for worse (‘Boys could never be trusted’) – with ratiocination. In sum, gender is a vital narrative element in key examples of the classic detective genre as well as narratives inspired by early period and Golden Age texts. In my own novel, the subversion of gender expectations is encoded into the plot and character development. I analyse the relationship between gender and genre in depth in Chapter Two of this thesis.

**Hardboiled Fiction**

The American response to the Golden Age detective story is the hardboiled lone-wolf private eye. Because my novel is inspired by Golden Age and hardboiled PI aesthetics, with hardboiled serving as the more influential subgenre in my writing method, and as I have analysed select examples of the former genre, now I will investigate examples from the latter and locate them within my research and creative practice.

Dashiell Hammett’s fiction is often considered the originator of the American hardboiled subgenre. His PI character, Sam Spade, is the archetype of the cynical loner. However, it was Carroll John Daly’s short story *The False Burton Combs*, published in the magazine *Black Mask* in 1922, that is regarded as the first evidence of a private eye narrative in the hardboiled genre (‘I ain’t a crook … I’m no knight errant either’). Thus the archetype was born: ‘a man out for justice and/or revenge, pounding perpetually rainy streets in a dark, corrupt American city’.

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79 *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 54.
81 Ibid.
Since the 1920s, the figure of the private eye has occupied the role of the wise guy, usually a male figure, a hard-drinking narrator who talks out loud (to the reader) and uses unorthodox methods to restore order in a broken society. Yet the hardboiled protagonist is an insider in relation to the problems to be solved – willing to drink Scotch and fraternise with shadowy characters, take a beating, spend a night in jail, or follow a dangerous lead into lawless territory.\textsuperscript{82} As Megan Abbott observes, the 19th-century pioneer narrative is touted as a notable inspiration for early hardboiled projects.

‘The common argument is that hardboiled novels are an extension of the wild west and pioneer narratives of the 19th century. The wilderness becomes the city, and the hero is usually a somewhat fallen character, a detective or a cop. At the end, everything is a mess, people have died, but the hero has done the right thing or close to it, and order has, to a certain extent, been restored.’\textsuperscript{83}

The reinstatement of order on the mean streets of the lawless city, if even for one brief moment, is a keystone of hardboiled sensibility. This reinstatement of order also necessitates an investigative method with teeth. How else will the sleuth find the murder, unmask the blackmailer, locate the missing person, or retrieve the stolen statue? To get the job done in a dangerous city or situation, Leonard Cassuto argues that the protagonist of the hardboiled tale often establishes ‘a code of behavior that substitutes for the corrupted morals of the society he occupies. The code emphasizes self-preservation and a nihilistic sense of duty.’\textsuperscript{84} Sister Holiday also has her own strange code, represented by the gold tooth implanted by her back-alley dentist-friend KK after the scuffle at the Brooklyn bar. Holiday views her own violence as ‘almost holy’ when she shoves and hits Prince Dempsey and punches Audrey’s attacker, justifying her actions

as ways to ‘extinguish an endless brushfire of misogyny’. Even Sister Holiday’s crucifix mirrors her sleuthing, or at least her attempt to be a proactive force for good; she views the horizontal line as a representation of doing, seeking, and moving, while the intersecting vertical line points up and down, representing contemplation with heaven, and perhaps hell, too.

Unlike the detectives in Golden Age fiction: the gumshoe usually suffers from injustice of one kind or another, and hence he intimately invests in justice on a personal level. In fact, the classic hardboiled protagonist’s imperfections, and in some cases deep wounds, shape his communication style. Lee Horsley underscores the idea that ‘slang, terse wit and sardonic wisecracks’ are trademark elements in the hardboiled protagonist’s protective armoury: ‘an assured voice that enables him to establish at least an illusion of control’. This hardboiled portrayal of surface control undermined by addictions, as evidenced by smartass comebacks that disguise vulnerabilities, is integral to Sister Holiday’s malcontent character as well as to that of the recalcitrant Prince Dempsey. To import attributes of protective armour, coupled with spiritual curiosity vis-à-vis prayer and rhetorical questions, into the figure of a lesbian nun means this character may feel recognisable as typical hardboiled figure (a nuanced loner with a taste for whisky) and divergent (‘Hail Mary’).

Like most wise guys, Sister Holiday is determined not to be seen as ‘a candy-ass’. Cynicisms and tough talk are not the exclusive domain of the hardboiled genre but they do help to define the tradition. Horsley contends that from Carroll John Daly’s character of Race Williams in the earliest *Black Mask* stories (1923–1934) through to late-twentieth-century

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87 *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 64.
88 Ibid., p. 142.
cinema – weathered guys like Clint Eastwood’s Dirty Harry, ‘such figures can be found powering their way through quintessentially hardboiled narratives, routing villains, reaching the end bloody but still able to pull the trigger’. On the mean streets of the filthy city, what will save you? Fancy words and good manners in the hardboiled world, or in my fictional New Orleans, are not as effective as physical action. Paradoxically, the need to be authentic, and a yearning to understand the world and be understood by it, permeate the hardboiled genre. This tension is present in Raymond Chandler’s hardboiled PI, Philip Marlowe: ‘I’m supposed to be tough but there was something about the guy that got me’. Marlowe’s narratorial self-aggrandisement and self-effacement – the careful weaving of reflections – is also echoed in Sister Holiday’s narration. For example, Sister Holiday is hot-tempered and quick to fight, but she also confesses to the reader that she is afraid of frailty: ‘the twins scared me. They were too small’. There is awareness within the character and the reader that Sister Holiday considers herself to be both lost and found. She struggles to calibrate her multiple selves – hard versus soft, pre-conversion versus post-conversion, bitter versus hopeful.

The words used and omitted by hardboiled protagonists provide critical clues to their inner lives and world views, as exemplified by Marlowe’s aforementioned acknowledgement that he knows he is ‘supposed’ to be something that he is not. Scott Christianson, in his article ‘Talkin’ Trash and Kickin’ Butt: Sue Grafton’, applies a theory developed by Dennis Porter to the analysis of hardboiled language. Christianson cites Porter, who explains that the ‘language style of the hardboiled genre allows for a “perfect match between language and behaviour,}

91 The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 69.
speech, and ethics”’. 92 What I infer from Christianson’s application of Porter’s theory to Grafton’s language is that in the hardboiled genre, the wisecrack is itself a tool of defiance, self-actualisation, and rebellion. This theory is demonstrated by Sister Holiday as she expresses her rage towards the ‘devil’, Prince Dempsey (‘drag Prince back to hell’). 93 She forcefully hits him in the knees with a ruler then pushes him. Her words and actions frequently cast her more in the criminal role than the authority figure she has been trusted to be. In hardboiled style, Sister Holiday’s self-interest devolving into depravity (‘knowing I could break him – it was delicious’) relates to and shares the same frequency as the criminal’s immorality. 94 She understands and envies Prince. She’s been there, throwing punches, taking a lick, and knocking back tequila.

While inhabiting and parodying the tropes of hardboiled storytelling, I am also trying to challenge them. Sister Holiday is neither predatory nor helpless, traits that defined many female characters in notable American male-authored crime fiction from the 1920s and 1930s. There is a self-fashioning and transformative potential embedded in the concept of a woman who is simultaneously a sleuth, a nun, and a teacher. Each of those jobs, or life positions, is mindfully chosen.

Also notable in hardboiled texts is the justification for vigilante justice, or at the very least, a flawed sense of good and evil. In my novel, as in many hardboiled works, there is tension between the notion that one person can make a difference in a chaotic world and a romantic desire to believe that one person, through the solving of a crime, can restore order in a grand way, delivering Justice with a capital J. Sister Holiday embodies both classic and hardboiled precepts in this regard. She initially starts her sleuthing as young Holiday, pre-conversion, to

avenge the violent rape of her brother by football players. It was the first time Holiday stepped into the post of moral arbiter, trying to follow clues and apprehend perpetrators, until her father told her to stop. She declares that she was prepared to seduce the attackers at a party in order to get them alone and make those ‘fuckers’ pay. She eventually leaves one of the rapists ‘hog-tied with his belt and tie, laying face-down in his own vomit’. In that aspect, Holiday embraces masquerade (a lesbian passing as a straight woman), making deception a part of her sleuthing method, as she graduates from stalking and revenge to detecting and justice. Holiday shows the reader that she is on the trail of the arsonist, but she also reveals that she is on a grander mission – to ‘nail’ Prince for ‘the greater good’.

The promise of queering Holiday and subsequently my sleuth tale offers another lens through which to explore crime and power, themes critically important to hardboiled works. Foundational issues like guilt, justice, and revenge look different through the eyes of a marginalised (queer feminist) protagonist from those of a white male. Holiday’s life experience – a closeted lesbian tearaway who abandoned her mother and herself during a crisis – has led her to see the world in a specific way. As a female amateur sleuth who is her own unconventional brand of spinster, Sister Holiday is an ‘other’. Her alterity and unique lens influence the reader’s lens in that she shows the reader what law and order might look like from the non-straight point of view of a character who has not felt systematically safe to exist outside male-dominated, heteronormative culture. While she knows she has the power to fight and save men (Jamie and Prince), she does not trust men or male power. Again, I would point to the scene when Holiday is intent on avenging the homophobic attack on her brother, pledging ‘to never take men’s

95 Ibid., p. 59.
96 Ibid., p. 60.
insatiable appetite for control for granted again’. Additionally, a lesbian character like Sister Holiday, for whom celibacy is a choice, invites the reader to confront a battery of questions, such as what does my community want versus what I want? Her vows contradict the deliberate work of the queer liberation movement. I give Sister Holiday space to meditate on the price she is willing to pay for order and how that tension destabilises her.

In hardboiled stories, protagonists express individualism that sometimes borders on isolationism. Private eyes are indeed private. I play with this trope by placing Sister Holiday in the convent where she lives alone but within a collective. In the convent, she wants to fit in, but she also seeks time by herself (‘I needed to dine alone … I could not bear talk of the fire with Sister Therese’). The reader also sees a willingness to admit vulnerability in her ‘new life’. Sister Holiday is cynical and wisecracking, but she still wants to perform well. This is a character who struggles to stay on track, however. There is always something threatening or provoking her. In the final draft of the novel, I tried to elevate the sense of paranoia (‘I also felt watched’). Also, Sister Holiday sees herself as a sleuth, but she is not very effective. She feels for clues in the garbage (‘the more disgusting the better’) but does not find anything. She uses her body in ways that are not sanctioned, such as reaching inside the pile of rancid trash, snooping through Prince’s guitar case, studying images on Arjune’s phone, ducking under the police tape of a crime scene, and attacking Prince after he refuses to share his knowledge of the fires. Using her physicality in transgressive ways, I would argue, colours Sister Holiday’s sleuthing methods as queer acts. Her queerness lets her ‘feel people out’ without going too deep. She states that her gay superpowers ‘open the door’ for straight women to be more forthcoming

98 Ibid., p. 58.
100 Ibid., p. 192.
101 Ibid., p. 108.
because they do not view her as a threat. She exploits this interpersonal dynamic in the Prison Birth Centre when she questions Peggy about her criminal background and Peggy’s boyfriend’s experience with arson. This leads her to suspect that the culprit had carefully researched arson methods. She also looks for the subtext about the arsonist: ‘Rather than go to an expert about the arson, why not go directly to the source, the arsonist’. But Sister Holiday also lets her biases misdirect her attention as she remains oblivious to significant clues, giving Sister Augustine the space to set more fires and cause more harm. In the genre tradition, the DIY sleuth differs from the professional detective, utilising informal or proprietary methods and often embodying cynicism over optimism. While the PI certainly seeks justice, PI work inherently represents a radical acceptance that a tidy resolution is most likely not possible. To this end, Sister Holiday as narrator acknowledges the lack of closure, concluding her story with what she does not know (‘I’m supposed to believe’) rather than with what she does know, leaving room for faith to fill in some of the gaps.

My processes of methodological inquiry have led me to draw upon and reinterpret select elements of traditional hardboiled fiction and classic detective fiction. This creative strategy – the processes of reading, reimagining, relocating, remixing, and hybridising – is, I argue, a core element of the detective fiction genre as well as queer writing. Generation after generation, detective fiction proves to be both enduring and flexible. From a genre dominated by primarily heterosexual white male PIs, readers can now experience a range of ideological and sleuthing perspectives by feminists, LGBTQ individuals, and people with ethnic minority backgrounds. I look forward to the time when I might read a hardboiled-influenced narrative featuring a female

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102 Ibid., p. 72.
104 Ibid., p. 331.
Muslim sleuth. What would set her investigative sensibility apart? How might she draw on ‘loner’ conventions popularised by authors like Spillane or Chandler? Just as the dime novel bridges the content of classic detective novels of the 1800s and that of hardscrabble PI novels of the 1920s, the emergence of the feminist detective character prefigures the queer detective narratives of the 1980s and beyond. This evinces the detection fiction genre’s responsiveness to attitudinal and societal changes as well as perennial reader interest in the genre. I would also argue that the growing demands for diverse perspectives and under-represented characters underscore the need for publishers to stay agile to meet market interests. My artistic aim is to formulate a narrative method that honours category expectations whilst also innovating and expanding the category.
Chapter Two: Social Identities and Cultural Institutions

Female characters in North American crime fiction began to evolve during the 1980s from the damaged dames, amoral femme fatales, and mutilated corpses popularised by hardboiled authors like by James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Mickey Spillane to the types featured in, most notably, novels by Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton, Laurie R. King, Barbara Wilson, and Katherine V. Forrest. These writers were working in the context of second-wave feminism and gay liberation, and the politics of these movements directly informed their narratives. Feminist neo-hardboiled authors such as Grafton and Paretsky, and feminist-queer authors such as Forrest, contributed self-aware, scrappy, and self-sufficient female detectives whose conscious identifications, for example naming oneself as a lesbian, fitted tightly within the plots.

Social identities in the feminist neo-hardboiled works intensify narrative suspense. Their thematic inclusion helped to redraw the genre’s female characters, who had, up to that point, generally conformed to a narrow set of predictable types. Similar to the way in which the political tumult and ideologies of Chandler’s place and time informed his plots, such as the Los Angeles mobsters in *The Long Goodbye*, feminist and queer crime fiction authors wove topical themes and identity politics into their projects. The social conditions, including sexism, homophobia, and violence faced regularly by lesbian characters such as San Francisco Police Department homicide detective Kate Martinelli in the 1990s-era Laurie R. King crime novels, and PI Jillienne Kidd in Stevie Mikayne’s *UnCatholic Conduct* (2014) indicate the hostilities that queer women experience.105

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In this chapter, I analyse the strategies used to create the social identities and cultural institutions at play in my crime fiction novel, explaining how I crafted them and how they relate to the initial research questions. I also historicise my approach to gender, sexuality, and spirituality and place my practice within a crime fiction lineage. I do this by analysing a selection of crime novels: Golden Age mysteries, classic hardboiled texts and their feminist and queer counter-traditions, and notable fiction featuring spiritual sleuths.

**Gender**

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.

— *Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex*

Gender has become – generally – more understood not as a fixed inborn feature of a person but as something that is an informative element of a person, an aspect that is individually expressed. This concept fuels Simone de Beauvoir’s argument from 1949 that ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’.106 What this assertion suggests is that gender is not sex, a biological category; rather, it is a cultural construct that is performed and observed in societal contexts.107 If anatomy is not destiny, you would not know this by reading Raymond Chandler’s hardboiled novels and short stories. Chandler’s narrator/protagonist, PI Philip Marlowe, performs male...

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107 My argument is that gender can be outwardly *performed* by an individual while it is also being observed in society and perhaps even informed by societal conditions and contexts. One example of this is an evolving awareness that gender identities exist beyond the binary of male and female genders. This evolution is reflected in various ways, including the growing trend of US-based colleges designating gender-inclusive bathrooms on campuses. ‘Schools and universities (including Johns Hopkins and Michigan State) … are recasting the traditional men’s/women’s room, resulting in a dizzying range of (often creative) signage and vocabulary’. Source: Aimee Lee Ball, ‘In All-Gender Restrooms, the Signs Reflect the Times’, *New York Times* (5 November 2015) <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/style/transgender-restroom-all-gender.html> [accessed 5 July 2016] (para. 6 of 39)
gender as it may have been expected at the time: Marlowe is a gallant man. While a level of shabbiness is acceptable to Marlowe, he also leverages properly timed quips to belie inner tumult and vulnerability. While he admits that he ‘never got to like killing people’, he knows that a rough up is all part of the job (‘I was his raw meat’) and is never afraid to insult a woman, kick someone, or wrangle a weapon out of the hand of a foe. He also has restraint, to a point.

He is contemplative and quick witted – a street-smart, cocksure, and virile man (‘It was a blonde. A blonde to make a bishop kick a hole in a stained-glass window’), the cynical American male response to the eloquent, upper-class armchair detective character of the Golden Age.

Where Sam Spade’s expressions of detachment increase the PI’s isolation, and Mike Hammer’s shoot-first bluster accelerates the thrill-ride of a Spillane novel, Philip Marlowe’s self-effacing quips add to his everyman appeal. These three characters are unique, but they all represent different iconic aspects of the ‘hardboiled man’ in the canon.

Chandler, writing after Hammett, is recognised as a seminal figure in the American hardboiled crime fiction popularised between the 1920s and the 1950s, and his fiction presents specific gender portrayals beyond Marlowe’s masculinity. Examples of these representations pepper ‘Trouble Is My Business’, Chandler’s short story in which female characters are minimised and disempowered when they are referred to as ‘dames’.

In The Big Sleep, Marlowe, a private detective, declares that women give him a hangover, and he describes Carmen Sternwood as a ‘dope’, her teeth as ‘predatory’, and her naked body as ‘corrupt’. These comparisons suggest that the narrator perceives women as objects and as less than human.

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110 Ibid., p. 93.
111 There a certain wry irony in the usage of ‘dames’, ‘broads’, and ‘girls’ – and slang is an essential feature of hardboiled genre. A reader should be reminded of historical context, as well, vis-à-vis language and what it reveals about social strata. However, these words and their usage still read to me as reductionist.
Like alcohol, women can be consumed, but too much will be poisonous. In ‘Trouble Is My Business’, the character of Harriet Huntress – a surname that serves to warn Marlowe and readers – is expected to ‘fall at some point’, implying that all women eventually falter, and she is ‘too tall to be cute’. In The Long Goodbye, violence shadows Marlowe’s appraisal of women in his taxonomy of the blonde (‘There are blondes and blondes’ … ‘the small cute blonde’ … ‘the big statuesque blonde’ … ‘you would like to slug her’). Analysing the misogyny present in Chandler’s hardboiled fiction, Ta-Nehisi Coates observes that ‘Marlowe is forever slapping some woman, or seducing somebody’s wife within minutes of meeting her, or declaring his sexual invulnerability to still another woman, or berating some man for being gay – and thus being a woman’. Gender is an instructive narrative component in Chandler’s work as he encodes masculine and feminine expectations into his characters’ actions and the narrative causality, exemplified by Carmen Sternwood’s attempted seduction of Marlowe. This informs the narrative by establishing rules of engagement. With a few minor exceptions, female characters and male characters are presumed to act in certain ways that track with Chandler’s world order. This thematic centrality inevitably made female characters dangerous. According to Stephen Knight, ‘while the early stories of Hammett and Chandler do deal specifically with gangsters, and Hammett always retains some sense of social crime, in the private-eye novels the real crimes solved, the deepest threats faced by the private eyes, come from personal betrayals, mostly by women.’

Chandler’s self-mocking yet morally superior PI (‘contempt for pettiness’) has informed my development of Sister Holiday as I am interested in a figure who is similarly duty-bound, sardonic, and contemplative. For instance, Marlowe admits he is ‘depressed’, and his surname is recognised as ‘sad and beautiful’. However, I want my protagonist to subvert the early hardboiled convention of limited and reductive gender roles. In The Long Goodbye, Philip Marlowe describes himself as ‘a lone wolf, unmarried, getting middle-aged, and not rich … I like liquor and women and chess and a few other things’. Sister Holiday is also a lone wolf, of a kind, as she is alone within the convent; she will not marry. Sister Holiday also has a penchant for liquor and women, and she participates in a figurative chess game with criminal elements. Whereas Marlowe defines his masculinity, in part, by his attitude to the opposite sex, Holiday does not. Marlowe and Holiday are both troublemaking agitators, simultaneously no-nonsense realists and cynics, and romantic at times. Unlike Chandler’s narrator/protagonist, however, Sister Holiday acknowledges women’s power and their powerlessness, particularly her own. This powerlessness results from a general societal imbalance as well as the character’s self-invented demotion: as a Sister of the Sublime Blood she is unable to function at the highest level of church authority held by male priests. Sister Holiday is arrogant and tough; she pounds the glass in the jail lobby and she physically and verbally spars with Sister Honour, but she also admits her shortcomings. Readers learn about her myriad deficiencies as well as her talents. She is ‘the first to admit’ – to herself and to the reader – that she is ‘shit at most things’, a fact that makes her aptitude as a music teacher distinct. Sister Holiday understands that she is flawed, but she does not feel useless. This is demonstrated by her reaction to the fire. With no hesitation, she

118 Ibid., p. 92.
120 Ibid., p. 151.
dashes into the burning school and saves Jamie’s life, carrying his bloody body out of the building. Throughout the story, she actively sleuths (‘I slipped into the empty hallway with Arjune’s phone’). Action – even action with no result – has more currency for the sleuth than mere talk.

Philip Marlowe’s chosen profession as a PI requires him to tangle with shadowy characters, and the work seems to suit him. Similarly, the more Sister Holiday tries to forsake sin and disorder, the more she is pulled towards it. Readers first meet her, in the narrative present, in a dark alley; alleys are common settings in the hardboiled world as they symbolise wrongdoing and back-door dealings. Just as Marlowe smells the gun of his drinking buddy Terry Lennox in The Long Goodbye, bringing the gun to his nostrils (‘a Mauser 7.65, beauty. I sniffed it.’), in my novel, Sister Holiday, who, as a Sister of the Sublime Blood, pledges to repudiate vice, runs a stolen cigarette under her nose and sniffs it before lighting it. A gun is held and a cigarette is smoked, but inhaling contraband – a ceremonial rather than a necessary teleological action – brings vice into the characters’ spirits as well as their corporeal bodies. These acts imply that for both characters there is a sensual interest in the sordid, and in Sister Holiday’s case, a passion for sin (‘fresh smokes, a handgun, and a brick of money were treats I could never have resisted’) that she is in an adversarial relationship with as a Sister of the Sublime Blood. Trouble is both of their businesses, and mischief is a sensorial engagement for these sleuths. Marlowe frequently details the temperature of coffee and the strength of a cocktail. Sister Holiday delights in the way the air changes when Prince Dempsey spits at her face after his arrest. She describes the feeling of hurting Prince as ‘exquisite’.

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123 Ibid., p. 150.
124 Ibid., p. 102.
characterisation is to illustrate that, while she heeds Sister Augustine’s edict to conceal her tattoos using gloves and scarves, acting in suitable or socially sanctioned ways – honouring codified expectations of women and of nuns – is not a central concern for Sister Holiday. She wants to fit in while simultaneously standing out. She does not always comport with her Order’s views. Even though Sister Augustine demands that Sister Holiday wear a black, Order-issued uniform every day (‘You’ll cover yourself, of course’), Holiday whines until her Principal allows her to dye her hair blonde.125 She wants invisibility and visibility simultaneously.

Part of my rationale for having Sister Holiday concurrently reach for erasure and visibility, while expressing complex gender attributes, even within the constraints of the convent black wardrobe, is to disrupt readers’ assumptions about the detective/sleuth praxis as it relates to gender expression.126 Crime writer Kate Allen believes that internalised homophobia and sexism account for the preponderance of butch lesbian detectives in the 1980s novels, including her own characters: ‘I think it is because butch is seen as strong and capable while femmes are always having to battle that “incapable” stereotype’.127 Allen’s acknowledgement suggests an unconscious characterisation within the gender binary that attached negative (incapable) value to a femme appearance. If a male-adjacent (butch) character is strong, then a female-identified (femme) character is weak. This is the thinking that drives many aspects of gender expression in classic hardboiled texts, especially by Raymond Chandler and Mickey Spillane (‘She was all

126 While ‘invisibility’ and ‘erasure’ are not the same thing, I deploy the word ‘erasure’ here to refer to the deliberate and almost fetishised ceremony of Holiday’s acts of concealment – covering her body in tattoo ink as well as covering those tattoos with gloves and scarves as a Sister of the Sublime Blood. While Katherine V. Forrest’s dyke dick, Kate Delafield, stays closeted as a ‘cover’ so she can stay on the ‘thin blue line’ of the police force so she can continue detecting, Sister Holiday’s layers of ‘covering’ both undermine and accelerate her goal of disappearing in order to fit in and, ultimately, continue sleuthing.
mine whenever I wanted her, a big, beautiful animal of a woman’).128 Therefore, a believable protagonist detective in many – but not all – of the early lesbian detective novels correlates with those binary coordinates. An example of this is Katherine V. Forrest’s LAPD Detective Kate Delafield, one of the earliest and most well-known dyke dicks, who rationally observes the grit and beauty of Los Angeles – the lurid details and the serene – in equal measure. The adroit detective also runs the most thorough criminal investigation in the county (‘A Kate Delafield investigation was solid, meticulous, documented … no sloppiness’).129 Delafield, a Vietnam veteran, who, as a girl, was always stronger and ‘more aggressive than other girls’, also makes time to comment on female characters, a trait shared with traditional PI characters (‘Judy Markham sauntered from the lobby, hips swaying’).130 Indeed, Detective Delafield ascribes to many elements of the hardboiled male trope, but, as I explore in Chapter Two of this thesis, she is also a three-dimensional character with nurturing and self-aware attributes.

Fashion choices and intentional physical gender manifestations, such as the cropped hair of Detective Kate Delafield, are still relevant today but no longer primary identity indicators or wholly representative cues of biologised body codes or gender expression. Playing with this notion, I wanted to write a lesbian sleuth character who could blend traditional binary gender expressions while complicating the notion of gender in a distinctive but cogent way. I created scenes and situations that showcase Sister Holiday assigning meaning to ‘traditional’ male signifiers (smoking, drinking, violence, womanising, cursing: ‘You curse more than I do’, Riveaux states) as well as traditional female gender signifiers (the desire to look good, envious of Audrey’s make-up, whining until Sister Augustine lets her dye her hair).131 These moments are

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130 Ibid., 28.
131 *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 140.
designed to help demonstrate how Sister Holiday constructs her femininity, sexuality, and religiosity outside and inside her New Orleans convent, which is ascetic relative to other orders. The conscious construction of self aligns with Sister Holiday’s earnest and misguided attempts to reckon with her past, her interlocked identities, and her evolving place in the world. When Audrey says ‘be yourself’, Holiday responds ‘I don’t know what that is’. Nonetheless, Sister Holiday still has the confidence to open the novel with brute force. She kicks the doors open in her own brand of chivalry as she tries to save two teenage boys, Lamont and Jamie – and ultimately saves only Jamie – from fiery calamity. During her narration she admires herself (‘She thinks I’m hot’). She also doubts herself, searching for mirrors wherever she can, since mirrors are in short supply in the convent (‘Any chance I could get I stole a moment with a mirror’). Sister Holiday is a work in progress.

Indeed, the path that Sister Holiday has chosen – temporary vows leading to permanent vows, a theme I will explore in the next instalment of this fiction series – needs to be tested at various points to enhance the threat of her falling off the track. For this reason, I have introduced the narrative trope of the femme fatale, a fixture of hardboiled and noir fiction, a seductive woman ‘noted for changeability and treachery’ who lures men into dangerous or compromising situations. I play with this genre expectation by writing the character of Rosemary Flynn as a queer omnisexual siren who wears ruby-red lipstick and tries to lure Sister Holiday into the expected lair of the femme fatale bed, though in this novel the symbol is the parallel twin beds in a hotel room. With her air of mystery, signature red lipstick, and amorous offer of a tryst, Rosemary presents Sister Holiday with the temptation of breaking her temporary vow of

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133 Ibid., p. 91.
134 Ibid., p. 142.
celibacy, an oath Sister Holiday pledged in an attempt to purify herself and search for balance, though it comes with severe self-denial bordering on the punitive. By retaining and repurposing the femme fatale trope in the queer character of Rosemary Flynn, I strive to honour the genre conceit of the sexy temptress while adding layers, politically and narratively, as Rosemary makes the object of her charms an unattainable, unavailable lesbian. Additionally, Rosemary Flynn is also an accomplished science instructor in her own right, an element of characterisation that aligns with feminist ideals. She has no ulterior motive to seduce Sister Holiday, unlike the unstable femme fatale Carmen Sternwood in Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*. Rosemary is attracted to Holiday; she wants a sexual connection, not a friendship, and therefore pursues her sexually and suggests a tryst. Sex is not a decoy for Rosemary but rather a goal, unlike for most other presentations of the femme fatale. The narrative predicament lies within the will-they/won’t-they tension and in how Sister Holiday reacts to the sexual advances of a woman to whom – she admits to the reader – she is attracted. Rosemary is also in the frame as a suspect – (‘Avoiding questions makes you seem guilty’) – an added complication.

The notion that gender is now understood not as fixed and biological but as constituted socially, culturally, and psychically, and as fluid and shifting, helps to create narrative tension by giving readers more opportunities to be surprised by characters and correlating plot points. One example of this is Holiday’s sleuthing praxis, which is informed by her interwoven gender, spiritual, and sexual identities. Sister Holiday, who has concealed her latticework of tattoos, accompanies Riveaux on a car chase to apprehend Prince Dempsey, and after the chase and Dempsey’s arrest, she meets Riveaux’s police officer colleagues. A policeman doesn’t know how to decode her visual cues.

Officer Smith howled. ‘Her? A nun? She looks like the gutter dyke I arrested in the Bywater a

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couple hours ago. Bitch tried to cut me with a broken bottle.’
‘Maybe the Lord should cut you.’ I smiled at him.
‘You shouldn’t say that. You’re a goddam nun.’
‘Didn’t you just say I was a gutter dyke?’ I licked my lips, tasted the salty dust
and gravel kicked up from the tires. I spit and it landed near Smith’s feet making him jump back.
‘Forget it.’ Officer Smith shook his head. ‘I don’t know what the hell you are, and I don’t want to
know.’
‘Then get out of my fucking way.’
He backed up, jerkily, tripping in the process, as if I were a rabid swamp rat launching at his ankle.137

Is it Holiday’s short, poorly bleached hair that signals a ‘gutter dyke’ to the police officer? Is it the way she stands? What is clear from this passage is that Sister Holiday harnesses her inscrutability – a form of masquerade – to literally and symbolically move a male authority figure out of her way (‘He backed up’) so she can continue sleuthing. She also exploits the presuppositions of being a nun (‘They talked so freely in front of me, they must have thought I was praying. And I let them think that’) to elevate her sleuthing practice.138 The primary goals with the scene that follows was to establish that Sister Holiday likes ‘the violence’, test the limits of lyricism within propulsive movement by grouping repeated words and phrases to establish prosody.

‘Want to know what I think?’
‘No.’
‘I think you like this. The chase.’
‘Naw. I want to help,’ I lied. Of course I liked it. Not only the chase but the violence. Fire slithering back to life after you were sure it was extinguished. I liked digging in the trash. The more disgusting the better. Feeling for clues in slime and filth. Yeah, I wore a scarf and gloves to conceal my tattoos. Sister Augustine made me. But I still put my hands where no hands should go. I liked speeding through red lights. Headfirst to the edge. Scraping enough skin to burn not bleed. It was Godly, really. The fire of vengeance. I liked the charge in the air when Prince Dempsey spat in my face, cursing blue blazes. Sleuthing was as impossible as it was consequential. Like kissing a married woman. Like a plague of locusts.139

I also crafted this narrative passage with fragmentation (‘Headfirst to the edge’), seeking to generate a nervous energy so it would feel streamlined, with sound-patterning and echoes of Chandler’s ‘I like’, but with enough room to hold restless, idiosyncratic swerves. Comparing

137 The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 149.
138 Ibid., p. 37.
139 Ibid., p. 150.
‘kissing a married woman’ and ‘plague of locusts’ points back to the queer-religious thematic centre.

Holiday’s odd but conscious decision-making, which resulted in her becoming Sister Holiday and subsequently an amateur sleuth, fits within the feminist tradition of intentionally shaping your own role in life, even if those decisions, such as an out lesbian selecting celibacy, might feel counter-intuitive to some. Similarly, an essential question within the feminist dialogue is asked when readers encounter women who break the rules, whatever the rules are. Sister Holiday decided to become a Sister and a sleuth not because of a dire financial need but as a way to right wrongs. She likes sleuthing. Plus, she thinks fighting crime is a ‘gift’ she can ‘offer to God’.140 She also knows that the world is dysfunctional and that extra help is needed, especially for marginalised people. She feels that she is capable – or at least she wants to be capable – of offering that help. That’s one of the reasons why the private-eye character exists, to fill in the gaps between established systems. The PI steps in where the law fails, and the law often fails women and queer people, as Sister Holiday learns after her brother’s assault. Tension seeks release, and as a narrative technique, the apparent incompatibilities – Sister Holiday’s queerness and her holy orders, her allegiance to the Catholic patriarchy despite her feminism, and her vigilante proclivities – raise the urgency for the protagonist. These inconsistencies introduce more narrative pain points and trap doors, increase the internal and external threats to Sister Holiday, and elevate the stakes for readers.

140 The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 60.
Sexuality

The 1980s-era mystery novels at the heart of Maureen T. Reddy’s argument in the article ‘Lesbian Detectives’ contain complex coming-out processes which inform story arcs and characterisation.141 Reddy contends that the process of accepting a lesbian identity echoes other narratives of awakening and revelations: ‘Several of these novels follow strikingly similar patterns, paralleling the hero’s investigation of a crime or mystery with her investigation of her own psyche’.142 Reddy’s examination contributes to my analysis of my own authorial motivations and ambitions, but in my book the coming-out process is inverted. In the context of evolving social mores regarding sexuality, the complicated process of coming out – someone understanding their truth then bringing that truth to the outside world – is informative but it is not integral to the narrative of The Scorched Cross. Holiday is already out. In many ways, conflicts arise because of her decision not to come out but to go back in. Taking vows presents new challenges and opportunities. Although this character can still identify as a lesbian, celibacy is a tool for self-growth; her Order brings order and ‘strips away the bullshit’.143

Indeed, being pious and celibate is a way in which Sister Holiday attempts to simplify her life and seek penance, and her need to atone partly motivates her decision to join the convent. The need to impose order also parallels the hardboiled restoration-of-order paradigm that often drives sleuthing. It begins with the acknowledgement that the world is ‘mean’ and out of

141 Her objects of study include Valerie Miner’s Murder in the English Department (1982); Sarah Dreher’s Stoner McTavish (1988); Lauren Wright Douglas’s The Always Anonymous Beast (1987); Katherine V. Forrest’s Amateur City (1984) and Murder in the Nightwood Bar (1987); and Marion Foster’s The Monarchs are Flying (1987).
Sister Holiday is desperate for a way ‘to make all the contradictions of my life fit’ – and to sort through the confusion and friction of her competing and overlapping identities – lesbian, feminist, and religious. As the reader discovers in the narrative past, in the Brooklyn scenes involving pre-conversion Holiday, the characters of Frank and Toni Walsh were displeased when their children both came out as gay. In my narrative environment, to be gay does present obstacles but it is not a taboo. The character of NOPD Sergeant Ruby Decker is legally married to another woman, though ‘good ol’ boy’ Detective Grogan is flummoxed by the ‘new normal’. Holiday struggles with her lust for women in the narrative past (Audrey and Nina) and the narrative present (Rosemary Flynn and Audrey).

The presence of queer characters, queer struggles, and queer storylines in detective fiction is not new. The genre has proven to be adaptable, as discussed in Chapter One of this thesis. While some of the gay/lesbian mysteries of the 1980s that echoed binary gender expectations, like stone butch/high femme, were found only on gay/lesbian fiction shelves and in paper catalogues – a necessity for discreet buyers before online book sales were possible – they still offered a refreshing diversity of images and representations of gay culture that were more inclusive than those found in mainstream crime novels. As discussed in Chapter One, Detective Kate Delafield is a dyke dick who inhabits the role of the archetypal stone-butcher and is simultaneously contemplative, flawed, and three-dimensional. In Murder in the Nightwood Bar, an intertextual reference to Djuna Barnes’s Nightwood, Detective Delafield breaks the nose of a man who has taunted her and called her a dyke, but she is also a tender and nurturing presence.

144 The streets are mean in Raymond Chandler’s hardboiled world. “Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man.” This quote is from Chandler’s essay, ‘The Simple Art Of Murder’, an essay that first appeared in The Atlantic Monthly in 1944. However, British writer Arthur Miller used the term mean streets in his book Tales of Mean Streets (1884), though ‘mean’ may have had a different meaning.
146 Ibid., p. 24.
for her community. Characters like Delafield were an exciting development within the genre. Rather than dour, humourless lesbians and fey gay male stereotypes cast by largely heterosexual authors for popular media consumption or dime store pulp, representations of post-Stonewall gay and lesbian characters in crime fiction felt new. They were ‘intelligent, ethical, and self-confident’. A contemporary and intersectional inheritor of the lesbian sleuth tradition is Cheryl A. Head, who, in Bury Me When I’m Dead (2016), advances the queer detective trope with the character of Charlene “Charlie’ Mack. PI Mack is a black lesbian who must negotiate layers of oppression. PI Mack is admired by her Detroit community, and perceived to be relentlessly tough, but her ‘internalized homophobia’ dismantles her. In a voicemail left for her love interest, Mack admits, ‘I’m not as brave as you’. Similarly, I want to give Sister Holiday edginess and human contours; she wears the scars (tattoos) of her gold-toothed, scrappy, and wayward past, but she is not a total pessimist. Sister Holiday is cynical but not on auto-pilot; she is curious, alive, and alert. She grieves for a dead cat but hits her student, Prince, with a ruler. She admires and is tortured by women’s complex realities. She is observant, pre- and post-conversion, and though she expresses her faith in unpredictable and eccentric ways, Holiday loves God and feels connected to divine mysteries on various levels. She strives to be strong, but, with damaged women, Sister Holiday lets herself be vulnerable. Indeed, as she returns to the Prison Birth Centre to counsel new mothers in prison, she summons her courage and finds a poignant, intimate connection even though she has committed to living alone (uncoupled) in a group (the convent) and on the margins of society.

149 The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery. p. 202: In the middle of a sex scene, Holiday asks Nina, ‘Wanna pray’? And she means it. She also talks about the importance of the physical body and physical pleasure: ‘Jesus came to us in the form of a body.’ Her recollection stirs feelings within her that contrast with her vow of celibacy.
There is a tradition of the sleuth – male and female – working and living on the margins of society in detective fiction. Sister Holiday’s celibacy and asceticism resonate with and allude to the diverse loner traditions found in hardboiled and broader detective fiction narratives, evinced in portrayals of the busybody spinster (Miss Marple) and OCD armchair eccentrics (Poirot and Holmes). Detective novels, including those inspired by feminist neo-hardboiled works, such as Sara Gran’s *Claire Dewitt and the City of the Dead*, represent the trope that the PI, male or female, is a loner of some sort. Gran demonstrates this in a flashback when the PI is being mentored: ‘The first thing you need to know about being a detective’ is that ‘no one will ever like you again.’ The narrator replies, ‘That’s okay … No one likes me anyway’.150 Many canonical male PIs, like Marlowe, were, arguably, men at the margins of their narrative environments. Marlowe is lucky with the ladies (Candy breathily demands, ‘Put me on the bed’), but he rejects marriage offers.151 Though they performed male gender roles as the roles may have been expected at the time, hardboiled wise guys did not settle into typical domesticity or prioritise traditional family values.

Similarly, I wanted to create a female detective figure who capitalises on her inside/outsider status and her queerness to advance her sleuthing (‘Growing up as a closeted lesbian with a former nun mother teaches you everything you need to know about secret-keeping and people-reading.’152). First, I needed to codify Sister Holiday’s queerness in the context of her religiosity. As I began composing my novel, I inquired: would self-selected celibacy and abstinence delegitimise Holiday as a queer character? According to Faye Steward, the answer is no. Steward suggests that queer mysteries bring a ‘socially critical perspective together with

152 *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 162.
boundary-crossing genders and sexualities, inviting readers to interpret queer figures and themes as literary incursions into cultural traditions and political discourses. The queer sleuth can bring a unique perspective to detection (‘My queer paranoia’). The queer sleuth is not inherently better or worse than a trained investigator, just notably different, and this divergence affords exciting narrative possibilities within the genre. A lesbian sleuth – and a nun – live and work outside the expectations of patriarchy and heteronormativity and those of dominant cultural constructions. That fact, compounded by primary social filters, can allow her to see differently. Within my crime fiction framework, the lesbian sleuth uses the otherness of her experience and viewpoint to make surprising syntheses, look in unexpected places (‘look for the secret code’), connect disparate clues, and take unconventional approaches. This adds another layer on Martin Priestman’s observation that the private eye has a ‘solitary, unofficial’ status, and can involve ‘bending or breaking the law’.

I contend that the lesbian sleuth, and indeed the queer sleuth, is in a unique position to defy genre assumptions and in turn to free herself from associated narrative predeterminations and therefore give the whodunit reveal more weight. For instance, Sister Holiday’s need for community blinded her to Sister Augustine’s criminal machinations. Additionally, a queer sleuth may understand criminality on an intrinsic level, because gay sex had been criminalised until relatively recently, and is still, in many places, considered different, abnormal, deviant, or illegal. Dovetailing with Maureen T. Reddy’s argument that the hero’s investigation of a crime

154 The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 56.
155 Ibid., p. 76.
157 In 2013, Montana removed ‘sexual contact or sexual intercourse between two persons of the same sex’ from its definition of deviate sexual conduct. Source: Tim Murphy, ‘The Unconstitutional Anti-Gay Law That Just Won’t
or puzzle parallels her investigation of her own psyche, a lesbian who makes the conscious decision to become a nun has been on a journey of personal inquiry. I would argue that experiencing rigorous reflection would make a lesbian sleuth a formidable investigator of her world. I chose to complicate this sleuthing prowess by obstructing Sister Holiday’s view, in some ways, with her noteworthy occlusions, including her bias against and obsession with Prince Dempsey. The stresses of her narrative predicament(s) and her ability to make decisions, including hasty, ill-informed decisions, is intended to intensify the reader’s investment in her journey and the narrative outcomes because a rigid agenda is not set; readers should be uncertain about what will happen next. ‘Queering’ the environment is a recognition that identities are not fixed, but rather, fluid and changing. This provides more pain points for characters as they fumble and feel their way through a changing world. This undercurrent of flux also can help to keep readers guessing.

Furthermore, in *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, Annamarie Jagose argues that ‘while there is no critical consensus on the definitional limits of ‘queer’, the word locates and exploits the incoherencies in those terms which stabilise heterosexuality’. In detective fiction, a *queer* approach can be used to widen narrative possibilities and leverage the concept of inconsistency as a generative tool. Bearing that in mind, the shift from the binary lesbian/gay (1980s) to queer (1990s and beyond) has different implications. What is distinct and different about queer detective fiction now versus the earlier iterations I have analysed is the inclusivity: non-binary

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158 In A Dictionary of Media and Communication, First Edition, Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday write, ‘A critical discourse developed in the 1990s in order to deconstruct (or ‘to queer’) sexuality and gender in the wake of gay identity politics, which had tended to rely on strategic essentialism. Opposed to gender essentialism, queer theorists see sexuality as a discursive social construction, fluid, plural, and continually negotiated rather than a natural, fixed, core identity. [Judith] Butler, seeking to destabilize binary oppositions such as gay/straight, introduced the key concept of performativity’. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Online Version 2016)

and gender-free queer characters appear more frequently now. The expansiveness of non-straight character identities can affect narrative development. One example of this is the word ‘transsexual’. In Gaudí Afternoon (1990), a character questions whether or not Frankie, the femme fatale, is transsexual, and this idea shocks other characters, even the out-lesbian protagonist, Cassandra Reilly. Conversely, the book Transition to Murder (begun in 2012 and reissued by Magnus Books in 2014), by transgender crime author Renee James, follows the quest of Bobbi Logan – a hairstylist, transwoman, and sleuth – and won a Chicago Writers Association Indie Book of the Year award. The Lambda Literary Foundation honours innovative achievements in transgender literature within its annual Lambda Literary Awards. Conversations around LGBTQ topics continue to grow. Language is a fluid system that is informed by cultural and social factors. Therefore, LGBTQ conversations have evolved, and art that reflects queer life has also evolved.

While LGBTQ people and topics are more visible in the western culture than anytime hitherto, heteronormativity is nevertheless still dominant, and by acknowledging the limits and influences of heteronormative culture and how they might play out in the world of a novel, my aim was to queer detective fiction in order to create space for exploration and to amplify narrative tension. Take, for example, this exchange between Audrey, a former lover, and Sister Holiday, as they get tangled in their own misconceptions about what ‘gay’ even means: “‘Can you still be gay?’ [she asked.] ‘I shrugged.’ ‘Of course I’m still gay’.” The juxtaposition of Sister Holiday’s shrug and her confident verbal retort draws the reader’s attention to the protagonist’s incertitude. And yet, celibacy is not incompatible with gayness in Holiday’s

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160 Renee James won the 2012 Chicago Writers Association Book Award for Indie Non-Traditional Fiction for her transgender murder-mystery when it was submitted under a different title, Coming Out Can Be Murder. <https://www.chicagowrites.org/book_of_the_year> [accessed 9 January 2019] (para. 9 of 10)
worldview. She is still attracted to women and therefore she is still gay. Holiday’s curious worldview should signal to the reader that the protagonist will be unorthodox in other ways too, including in her work as an amateur sleuth, which will shape narrative development. Indeed, Sister Augustine weaponises Sister Holiday’s queerness by making her and Rosemary share a room at the Convention, as a forced distraction, as well as abusing Sister Holiday’s need for community and structure (‘Growing up queer – “tolerated” by my parents, forever worried about riling them up, getting tossed out of the apartment – made me crave a family of my own’).162 Sister Augustine knows Sister Holiday would not be accepted by any other Order, and she therefore exploits queer marginalisation.

While the United States has generally made notable strides towards equality, queer people are still marginalised and disenfranchised.163 In 2017, by Presidential Executive Order, Donald Trump banned transgender individuals from serving in the United States armed forces.164 LGBTQ individuals still face discrimination and scorn.165 Meanwhile, the queer-identified community grows more heterogeneous year by year. That crime fiction can incorporate the dynamism of social change into the narrative environment is part of what I feel makes it an agile art form. In ‘Amelia Butterworth: The Spinster Detective’, Joan Warthling Roberts argues that ‘[w]e have come to appreciate the mystery story as a microcosm of the culture and mores of the times it portrays: it changes as they change’.166 In the past decade, a growing number of self-

163 A noticeable fissure still exists between religious communities and LGBTQ communities. The unlikely election of controversial businessman Donald Trump as United States President in 2016 suggested the depth of influence of evangelical, far-right political figures – traditional opponents to same-sex marriage and LGBTQ rights.
165 Statistics from a 2018 Human Rights Campaign survey reveal that 73 per cent of LGBTQ youth have received verbal threats based on their actual or perceived identity. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/2018-lgbtq-youth-report> [accessed 24 April 2018]
identified lesbian mystery authors, such as Val McDermid, Katherine V. Forrest, and Stevie Mikayne, have referenced the contemporary cultural landscape that I occupy, the world of legal lesbian marriage, lesbian divorce, lesbian families, trans and non-binary visibility. Additionally, since the metanarrative of the book is concerned with what happens when you lose control of the story you tell yourself about yourself, Sister Holiday and the majority of the characters confront the untidiness of reinvention. Societal change – in the form of dwindling Catholic congregations – is viewed as disastrous by Sister Augustine, a high-ranking nun with more than forty years of service. This ‘new’ reality and her response to it provoke her arson.167 As homosexuality moves from being classified as illicit to a more visible, commonplace feature of Western society, characters like Detective Grogan, a traditional Louisiana native, push back or are confounded by the new realities. The characters stumble as they try to find their footing on unstable cultural ground.168 Ultimately, I argue that in a queer detective fiction story, every character has an opportunity to be their own sleuth, pulling apart language, testing the limits and habits of perception, and interrogating expectations to get closer to the truth, or at least a truth.

167 In The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, Sister Augustine’s strategy is to create traumas (arson, murder, panic) to demonstrate that only the church can providing healing after a trauma. Her crimes take root in psychopathy and obsession, but the metanarrative of this novel, symbolised by Sister Augustine’s turn to crime and Sister Holiday’s conversion, is how one responds to the loss of control of their story, including the threat of losing their identity. The empty church pews due to shrinking congregations, the plummeting enrolment at the Catholic school, the fear that God is no longer seen as relevant in a distracted world all lead Sister Augustine down a precarious path. This plot intertwines with Sister Holiday’s arc as the sleuth also responds to an existential crisis with an extreme action. Holiday overcorrects her own truculent behaviour, in part, by becoming Sister Holiday.

168 ‘Appearing, succeeding and becoming remarkably varied within 20 years, lesbian feminist detection has been one of the most striking signs that crime fiction is still capable of representing, in its apparently unending diversity, issues of real and new importance to its authors and readers.’ –Stephen Knight, Crime Fiction since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 179.
There are two notable examples of religious sleuths in fiction that I have analysed and interpreted in concert with the creation of my nun-sleuth novel: G. K. Chesterton’s *Father Brown* and James Runcie’s Reverend Sidney Chambers from *The Grantchester Mysteries*.

Both of these examples come from collections of short stories that root crime-solving in religious settings. G. K. Chesterton employs a first-person point of view to demonstrate how Father Brown solves mysteries. Father Brown is not the storyteller – a distinct narrator is – but we learn about Father Brown through his deductions, his lexicon, the reflections he shares with his congregation, and how he interacts with other characters. Just as readers see Holmes through the camera-eye narration of Watson, Father Brown’s thoughts, via dialogue or action, are made clear.

Chesterton’s sleuth stories also use the first-person plural – ‘we’ – as if the reader were part of the book’s congregation and therefore a part of the deductive process.169 ““What we all dread most,” said the priest in a low voice, “is a maze with no centre. That is why atheism is only a nightmare”’.170 Through that sentiment, the storyteller helps us understand how Father Brown thinks: he equates a Godless life with a meaningless nightmare. This provides clues to his investigative sensibility as well. Father Brown looks for patterns and areas of certainty. He feels confident in his assessments and he does not underestimate the depths of human longing, loss, and fear. While anchored in whodunits, the *Father Brown* short stories allow spiritual mysteries – questions of fulfilment and life’s meaning – to run along parallel tracks with the crimes in question. The frequent deployment of the pronoun ‘we’ accentuates the experience of

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170 Ibid., p. 150.
collectively solving a riddle. Indeed, while his language is often lyrical, technicalities matter; clues reside within the lived experience – in the quotidian – and the astute reader needs to pay close attention. In his 1930 tutorial ‘The Ideal Detective Story’, Chesterton writes that ‘the detective story differs from every other story in this: that the reader is only happy if he feels a fool’. At its core, a detective story must be solidly constructed – a balance of red herring, detail, and appropriate clues – so that the reveal feels both surprising and earned. It cannot cheat. Chesterton emphasises the importance and the reward of technical construction as a form of sleight-of-hand concealment. This proved useful when crafting the subtle clues of Sister Augustine’s long-game orchestration of exploiting Sister Holiday as well as Sister Augustine’s psychopathy (‘What’s it like to spend sixty years without having sex? Did it make you crazy’?).

Another religious character who leverages his moral convictions to help solve mysteries, even when those beliefs are not quite firm, is Vicar Sidney Chambers, Honorary Canon of Ely Cathedral. Unlike Holiday, the clergy-sleuth Chambers, created by James Runcie, is married and has a young daughter. Both Chambers and Sister Holiday are musically inclined, though, with Chambers loving the improvisatory qualities of jazz and Holiday appreciating the fact that music is a ‘living thing’ – a mystical and Godly gift. Vicar Chambers also provided a useful reference for my religious sleuth because of the flexibility of his faith. Both sleuths have chosen to devote their lives and careers to God, but they remain open to learning. Holiday’s spiritual curiosities, like those of Chambers, are, to some degree, malleable, and this informs her views on crime. For example, she craves Sister Augustine’s mentorship (‘I didn’t want her to let me

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173 Ibid., p. 151.
She also needs to ‘nail’ Prince, even though Prince is innocent, while she lets the guilty Sister Augustine go free. Sister Holiday’s imperfect religious character and lack of ethical rectitude are crucial, both for her characterisation and for the development of the narrative. Sister Holiday dedicates her sleuthing to God, but she does not believe that morality is circumscribed, nor does she believe in moral absolutes. She justifies Sister Augustine’s crimes and her own transgressions. Indeed, the sleuth’s temerity is another popular trope of detective fiction. This determination, bordering on myopia, keeps the detective working the case, pounding the pavement, despite the odds. Sarah Williams contends that, in the creative practice of crafting hardboiled fiction, morality is a ‘crucial’ element. For a protagonist who is a ‘loner,” Williams writes, ‘dispensing their own style of justice, […] we, as readers, need to be able to give our agreement and assent. More than any other figure, the hardboiled detective is on a quest to right wrongs and to rescue the downtrodden’. Though Sister Holiday’s moral compass is not set in stone, her sense of nuanced morality entertains discussions about concepts of a ‘calling’ and ‘being called’ to a vocation (the Sisterhood, PI work, teaching) in the modern age.

Analysing the character of Vicar Chambers was generative for my writing practice because of the gradations of his spiritual vacillation. For example, in Sidney Chambers and the Forgiveness of Sins, Sidney preaches a sermon on the nature of penitence. Told in close third-person point of view, readers see – and hear – the Reverend’s musings. During the sermon, he asks his parishioners ‘What is true contrition?’ – or is he asking himself? Sister Holiday also

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175 Ibid., p. 67.
questions herself and her world (‘Was everyone harbouring a secret? Did everyone need a way to escape daily torments?’).\textsuperscript{178}

Like Reverend Chambers, Sister Holiday is a character with room for spiritual doubt as well as growth. I have progressed with my drafts, providing opportunities to render a brand of spirituality that is as quirky as the character herself. She is an ascetic Sister, but she has not jettisoned her desire for sex, guns, smokes, and whisky. Sister Holiday and Prince Dempsey, the suspected offender, have both succumbed to darker yearnings, making them morally equivalent. But it is the character of Sister Holiday who chooses a new life, a life of order within an Order (the Sisters of the Sublime Blood). And while she believes in doctrinal redemption, she does not see Prince Dempsey as a candidate worthy of redemption. Similarly, Sister Augustine, the principal and head Sister, warps religious zeal to justify her own criminality. The solipsistic ethical codes of Sister Holiday (sleuth) and Sister Augustine (criminal) motivate the primary tensions in the novel. Holiday Walsh wants to be – and becomes – Sister Holiday because she craves order and meaning, which would be a framework for her own strange faith, but this also means that she will be, technically, controlled by the patriarchy as a Catholic Sister.\textsuperscript{179} She does not yet know what she wants or needs, and she takes readers on the quest with her. When Holiday realises she does not possess the language or temperament to connect authentically with her fragile mother, she admits that her identity was ‘defined by selfishness’, and she wonders who she would be without her protective armour of dissidence (‘Who was I to begin with?’).\textsuperscript{180} Thus, she willingly commits herself to the Sisters of the Sublime Blood.

\textsuperscript{178} The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 223.
\textsuperscript{179} When questioned by Rosemary Flynn about the contradiction of being a feminist who serves under the patriarchal authority, Sister Holiday replies with a typically flippant retort: ‘They hardly even talk to us, but Father Reese is fine. It’s better that he’s a flatliner. We have our own projects and worship. We stay out of each other’s way. Besides, Sister Augustine has our backs’. The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 253.
\textsuperscript{180} The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 238.
The simultaneity of her multiple identities – lesbian, feminist, servant of the Lord, someone who needs order (via the Order), and someone who longs to transgress – causes friction. Even if she wanted to, it would be hard for Holiday to stay in one lane or another, as her identities often intersect. As a hardboiled-inspired protagonist, she is the interpreter of her world and the world of the novel. Sister Holiday is both object and subject because we see her as a character in her world, but we also see the world how and when she chooses to show it to us. We are frequently reminded of her religious and moral contradictions (‘I should have left it alone’).181

Holiday’s active detection is also connected to the arc of her religious awakening. The physical conundrums (whodunit?) mirror the metaphysical (what is death? who am I?) and both puzzles invite the engagement of all the senses. The emphasis in the novel is often on Holiday by Holiday – how her world smells, sounds, feels, and tastes. She also knows that God is watching her. She’s on a spiritual path to enlightenment and reparation, though it is not a smooth, straight, or level road. To that end, her occlusions and what she observes about Prince originally makes her feel that he must be guilty. But as the book develops and her religiosity deepens, Holiday’s sleuthing skills also develop. She attempts to become more reasonable, admitting that her emotions have indeed misguided her. However, when her earlier logic proves to be faulty, for example when she discovers it is not Prince but rather Sister Augustine who is guilty, Sister Holiday reverts to her selfish behaviours (‘I already killed one mother. I wasn’t going to lose another one’).182

To add a further dimension to the role of identities and cultural institutions, I seek to thicken characterisation with religious disaffiliation. Though she is devout, Holiday’s mother,

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182 Ibid., p. 319.
Toni, had disaffiliated from her own Order so she could marry Frank and have children. In many ways, this disaffiliation amplifies the tension when Gabriel and Holiday both come out as gay (‘I left the Order for this?’). Raising a family trumped Toni’s religious vocation. Years later, in a reversal that she hoped would make her mother proud, even though Toni did not live long enough to see, Holiday disaffiliated from gay culture to join a convent. These disruptions serve to tie the fates of Holiday and her mother together in surprising ways. Holiday is determined to succeed as a nun even though her mother chose to leave the Sister’s way of life. Will history repeat itself, and will Holiday leave the convent, or will she stay on course? I rendered the disaffiliation storylines to amplify tension between Sister Holiday’s competing and overlapping identities – her queerness and her religious commitment. The reader can concurrently invest in both narrative outcomes – leaving or staying.

Beyond disaffiliation, I was interested in developing a character denuded of modern luxuries. Sister Holiday does not own or use a computer or mobile phone. What she has gained in spiritual wealth she has lost in terms of material wealth (‘nuns had no money nor use for excesses’). She has been stripped of digital devices in an increasingly digital world, and this functions to isolate Sister Holiday from her peers and her teenage students. Her modest means also inspire her to see more and notice more. At least she thinks so. She learns she must rely on herself and her faith. As she and Jamie exit the fast-burning east wing in Chapter Two, she prays for courage. Prayer is always there when Holiday needs it and she makes it her own, hybridising recognised prayer with her own prayer, creating a remix (‘Hail Mary, Mother of God. Sister Holiday, Grow up. This is what you wanted’). However, her faith also confuse and limits her,

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184 Ibid., p. 208.
185 Ibid., p. 186.
evinced by her inability to pursue her romantic attractions to Rosemary Flynn or Audrey, or to find the intimacy she craves (‘I wanted to bring my mouth to hers and smear her brick-red lipstick’). A blindspot in Sister Holiday’s vision gives Sister Augustine space to continue setting the fires, and in this way, the arson tests Sister Holiday’s spiritual threshold. She commits to finding the perpetrator, but she fixates on Prince Dempsey’s guilt, refusing to offer him the very redemption she has sought by building a new life. Redemption is a value that drives the Sisters of the Sublime Blood, and her inability to be objective with Prince contributes to Sister Holiday’s enduring bifurcation. The reader is left to wonder if the emphasis on looking for clues is an over-correction of the internal mysteries that nag this anti-heroine. Since this is the first book in a series – the Sister Holiday Mysteries – it is useful to remind readers that the sleuth’s mutually complicating identities create an ongoing problem that is nowhere near resolved in the first book. As these intersecting complicating social and spiritual identities work with and against each other, they form another narrative motor that helps drive the story forward. They layer additional queries on top of the whodunit by continually introducing brand new questions and keeping readers guessing, wondering what will happen next. Will a sense of dislocation follow her everywhere?

The tension produced by the cross-hatching of identities also moulds Sister Holiday’s narrative journey into a zigzag rather than an arc, represented by her decision to let the arsonist go free rather than laying claim to a traditional form of justice. While no moral code is restored at the end of the book, Holiday revises her world view slightly and tries to accept, if not make peace with, events she cannot change. This is a significant moment for Holiday. Though it causes her physical pain, she resists her desire to kiss Rosemary. She does not heal herself or answer her

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pressing questions, and she remains self-centred, but at the end of the novel, she sees the broken world in a new way (‘If endings are just a series of unexpected beginnings, I’m okay with that.’). The word ‘okay’ invites various interpretations, but in the context of the scene and the anti-hero’s narrative journey, the equanimity of ‘okay’, even if it is temporary, is evidence that this spiritually nuanced character has grown somewhat. The result for the reader, after adequately investing in the character, should be a sense of confidence in this scrappy, flawed sleuth and in her ability to crack a case, albeit in a sloppy, sideways manner. The character for whom you have been worried, the character for whom you have been rooting, has exercised self-control and a modicum of self-care. She possesses unique tools, and she is moderately aware of those tools and how to use them. This hopefully lets the reader buy into the premise that this character has the constitution and grit to tackle another mystery.

Another emblematic feature of a crime fiction series versus a single book is room for continuance or sustained mysteries. The located timeliness and contemporary characterisation of this novel is inherently risky, and part of my creative strategy is to aim to narrativise elements of the current zeitgeist in a way that would still feel compelling to readers ten or one hundred years from now. Over-emphasizing today’s trending concepts would tie the novel too closely to specific temporality and compromise its enduring relevance, similar to the way Gaudí Afternoon by Barbara Wilson, a pioneer in the queer crime fiction genre, was cutting-edge when it was published in 1990, but now reads as somewhat dated due to the characters’ shock and anxiety over transsexuality, as explored earlier in this chapter. Too little topicality, however, would deracinate the text from its indirect requirement to engage with and critique the social landscape. Indeed, what drives me as writer of detective fiction is to utilise the lens of the queer sleuth as I

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have come to define it: a sleuth who is able to deploy her alterity as part of her identity as well a
tool to advance her sleuthing practice. From her experience outside of mainstream conventions,
she has the ability to see what the mainstream cannot see and feel what the mainstream cannot
feel, and she can use these relatively heightened or unique viewpoints to advance her sleuthing
during a time of notable change (‘Gay marriage is legal now’). 188 Sister Holiday is destabilised
by the shaky ground under her feet, but she is also accustomed to falling, lifting herself up, and
forging her own path (‘no sex ed class I took discussed lesbian sex’). 189 In The Scorched Cross, I
want zeitgeist to play a greater role than setting and act as an informative element of
characterisation for Sister Holiday – her friction and idiosyncratic convictions. Plot is also
advanced by topical concerns, such as the fact that, in North America, Catholic church
congregations are shrinking; this development is so severe that Sister Augustine tries to reverse it
by setting fires and creating havoc and chaos to remind the flock that they are only safe with the
Lord. My goal is to deploy located timeliness in a way that serves my goal of contributing a fresh
variation on the amateur sleuth tale.

189 Ibid., p. 168.
Chapter Three: Craft

Earlier in this thesis I delved into hallmark features and conceits of sleuth and detection fiction as well as the influence of social and cultural institutions on my creative practice. Now I will critically reflect on my aesthetic and ethos to examine the principles underlying the creation of my crime novel. I will analyse the narrative strategy that braids three distinct storylines. I will also explain how I utilised craft techniques – such as the use of figurative language, an idiosyncratic prose style, and the first-person narrative mode – to support my ambition of meeting the genre expectations of a whodunit puzzle while seeking to make an original contribution to the sleuth fiction category. Reader feedback on Draft Twelve was transformative, revealing a picaresque journey for Sister Holiday rather than a novel that was structurally investigative. Therefore, I will explain my strategies for revision that correlated to such new realisations.

Narrative Structure & Flashbacks

In a whodunit, the temporal architecture must be tightly controlled. Time, like other craft materials, is a storytelling tool, and my treatment of temporality, however conventional or experimental, should be in the service of the plot and the crime fiction promise of answering a question. A narrative sense of time, via a timeline, can establish the chronology of events, and it can hold elevated importance in the detective fiction tale where the concept of ‘next’ – needing to know what will happen next – undergirds the story. The writer’s treatment of time should keep
this in consideration. In the diage
tic mode of my novel, Sister Holiday is the narrator. Her voice is the primary voice through which readers receive investigative details as well as atmospheric clues. Similarly, the reader’s sense of temporality is filtered through Sister Holiday’s relationship with time (‘The next thing I knew it was past midnight’). How and when clues and tensions are introduced or not introduced, and moments when the narrative present and narrative past become blurred, should contain enough fuel to propel the reader ahead, closer to the resolution of the crime, while leaving enough space for drawing interesting characters and memorable moments. Tension seeks release, and mystery genre readers expect a reveal of some kind, though it may not be the apprehension of the criminal.

Temporality in a hardboiled-inspired narrative is not limited to causality, however. There is room for strategically placed moments of surprise or meditation on the treatment of time, even in first-person point of view, such as in the lyrical passages by PI Marlowe and in the dream sequences of Sara Gran’s feminist sleuth Claire DeWitt (‘That night I dreamed about Constance’). These temporal interruptions – and indeed a dream is its own category of deregulated time – work because they provide the reader with information about the sleuth’s mindset, information that may warp the causal nature of their investigative processes and the ways she or he plan to mete out justice. The aforementioned example from Gran is also relatively economical, and its succinctness helps it cohere with the action that comes before and after. Ultimately, I argue that the interconnectedness of content and form is elevated in the sleuth story; forward momentum, even in a prayer, dream, or flashback, must still help the reader accelerate toward a narrative resolution. Most of the sex scenes in The Scorched Cross occur in the

191 The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 32.
narrative past, via flashback (‘I recall the softness of her skin as I rested my face on her stomach’).193

To keep the narrative energy moving ahead in the novel without flattening scenes, the writer must closely calibrate the interplay of action, dialogue, and internalisation in order to move the reader through the exterior and interior worlds seamlessly. The balance is key because if pacing goes wrong, or the story slows too much, weighted down by heavy exposition, reader engagement is threatened. If a reader loses interest because of lopsided placement of backstory, circuitous digression, or prosaic flourishes, the crime fiction promise of solving the riddle is compromised. How, then, can flashbacks still serve to nudge the reader forward?

To begin to answer this question, it is useful to consider narratology, the study of narrative, particularly the work of Gérard Genette and Theodore Martin, who examine the variety of temporal relations between ‘story time’ and ‘narrative time’.194 Story time relates to time ‘implied by the chronological happenings of the story’ whereas narrative time refers to the ‘time that reshapes that story in the telling’.195 For instance, although Sister Holiday’s mother died in the van fire three years before the ‘present’ day, readers learn of the event after the second school fire and second death on campus as the protagonist sits and reflects in a church pew, on page 92. Accepting that time is a construct within a construct (the novel), I wanted to unlock the ‘narrative’s capacity for temporal autonomy’ that results from disrupting chronology.196 I concluded that a nuanced temporal treatment would also serve the motivations of the defiant sleuth protagonist as she struggles to claim and understand her own independence,

193 The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 239.
195 Ibid., p. 2.
pre- and post-conversion. Nonlinear narrative models, such as those found in touchstone novels by Virginia Woolf and Kurt Vonnegut, portray events out of chronological order, freeing the significance of these events outside of their causality patterns. While the reader of Joyce and Woolf, for example, may be aware of the nonlinearity of the text and accept the lack of temporal concurrence as part of the reading experience, the detective fiction reader, who might be considered a ‘paranoid’ reader, the influential category of reader defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, may not be so flexible. A paranoid reader is a highly attuned reader, digesting and scrutinising every detail as pertinent to plot, and only at the end of the tale does it become clear which features were indicative of a setting or character rather than a vital plot point. The sleuth protagonist and the reader (a proxy sleuth) scan for clues and discover the world in tandem. Therefore, the adroit reader of detective fiction would most likely expect nonlinearity or a chronological inconsistency to also serve plot.

For these reasons, I experimented with structural nonlinearity in the middle section of the book. I created partitions through a three-act structure in which the past and present were interleaved in Part Two alone. However, reader feedback on Draft Twelve revealed that this strategy did not contribute to the overall narrative experience. In fact, it threatened to slow the story’s cumulative velocity. As Jack M. Bickhman observes, ‘Disaster works (moves the story forward) by seeming to move the central figure further back from his goal, leaving him in worse trouble than he was before the scene started’. The isolation of the disasters of the ‘narrative past’, such as Toni’s death and the consolidation of the memories exclusively in Part Two, was too lopsided. Therefore, I chose to marble in the memories (disasters and their contexts)

throughout the entirety of the book rather than load all of the weight of the past into Part Two. The alternative method of marbled flashbacks proved to be a more cogent method.

Though they must be used with discipline, and, ultimately, must not decelerate the story, flashbacks can also free a narrative from the convention that time is a straight line. Just like other materials used by the writer to fit the goals of a project, time can be bent, sped up, knotted, or slowed down for strategic purposes, within the framework of the protagonist’s storytelling. This is particularly interesting in the queer novel because, as Elizabeth Freeman argues in *Time Binds*, an exploration of queer temporality, chronological dissonance and sexual otherness are fundamentally intertwined, because queer people experience self-actualisation – to whatever degree – on their own timelines.199 There can be an illusory sense of a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ coming out of the closet; it is a ‘discontinuous history’.200 Sister Holiday is not straight nor conventional in any way, and rules both do and do not apply to her; therefore marbled flashbacks honour this disjointed character. With tight control, a flashback can become a portal. Moreover, by marbling in the ‘then’ and the ‘now’ for the duration of the novel, the reader experiences specific moments of time in Sister Holiday’s past as present. Marbling backstory is another way of signalling an indistinct present and past, suggesting that the sleuth’s history is not over. The danger of the flashback is that it can be unpredictable. Within a disciplined structure, the ‘then/now’ temporality is regulated so that the paranoid or alert genre reader is not frustrated. This approach also allowed me to orchestrate certain reveals that needed to feel organic in this unique story world and in the sleuth’s ‘mess’.201 And since my goal was to create a character-

driven pacey detective novel, I attempted to draft the book with a tonal consistency. Fleeting remembrances come and go, and readers learn that the past is as inescapable as the sleuth’s tattoos. Her pre-conversion and post-conversion selves are closer than Sister Holiday cares to admit, and sometimes her old and new selves overlap, such as when Audrey visits her in New Orleans. Sister Holiday is indeed the totality of her ill-fitting parts, whether she likes it or not; she cannot fly to New Orleans, start a new life, take a new name, and erase her past. My goal with threading in flashbacks is to offer the illusion of the dematerialisation of temporal and spatial markers. With careful control of the memories to assist the reader in redirecting their attentions, this temporal mode facilitates the kaleidoscopic effect by letting Sister Holiday live convincingly side-by-side with Holiday, her old rowdy self, an important element of the overall narrative experience.

**Strategies for Compelling Characters**

To support my ambition of developing fascinating characters, I have developed a map of Saint Sebastian’s School and a grid of personality traits. James Scott Bell finds character grids of this ilk useful to ‘create dynamic character interactions and find points of conflict from the past, present, or future’. 202 I have written complex backstories for characters, including secrets they have not shared with other characters, details that did not make into the first draft let alone the final draft. Similarly, Patricia Highsmith sees the utility in pre-writing – ideating before the first draft – to develop a strong foundation for a suspense novel. About her own practice Highsmith observes:

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My notebooks are filled with pages, perhaps twenty or more, for each book I have written, which are simply tangential or fantastic rambles around the germ or the main action or situation, which is the only thing that remained constant in the developing process. These divagations usually bear no resemblance to the final book. But they are necessary for better ideas to come later. 203

Overwriting character backstories, casting characters with real photographs, and creating a map in which scenes play out can help not only reveal how characters move through the constructed novel world but also how they can operate like an orchestra. Each ‘character’ has a specific role to play, but the ways they interact – sparking friction, annoying each other, soothing each other, as in the case of Bernard and Sister Holiday – add texture and helps to create the literary atmosphere (‘[Bernard’s] punk attire was so much like my old wardrobe. A cruel mirror’.). 204

The relationships between characters, especially between Sister Holiday and Prince Dempsey, provide additional opportunities to understand the protagonist’s preoccupations, flaws, blind spots, skills, and overall sleuthing process.

Though she has pledged to walk the ‘righteous path’, Holiday is obsessed with and suspicious of Prince Dempsey, whatever he does or does not do. 205 Prince (an ironic name) represents the patriarchy (‘Crazy bitch’) and yet Sister Holiday saves his life by helping to inject him with insulin in the ‘butt cheek’ during a dangerous diabetic episode. 206 After Draft Six, I realised that the narrative needed more events where Prince’s behaviour, coincidental or otherwise, seems to confirm Sister Holiday’s suspicions and give her what she believes to be hard evidence. One of those scenes added is when Prince urinates on the sidewalk shrine, extinguishing the flames of solidarity with his own bodily fluid. Additionally, he uses fire-related

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204 *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 266.
205 Ibid., p. 331.
206 Ibid., p. 230.
language to fuel his homophobia, but his connection to the crime is still tenuous at best. This uncertainty helps to keep the reader questioning Prince’s guilt or if Sister Holiday is obsessed with him because it fits within her feminist or extremist predilections. This hopefully helps the reader view Sister Holiday as a person with flaws and miscalculations – hamartia – rather than irreversible mortal failings. 207 I do not want Sister Holiday to be a caricature; she is trying to be patient but she must fight her instincts (‘I wanted to … pin him down by the throat like a fox’). 208 She must address this bifurcation – the cleaving between her emotional and rational halves – if she is to advance on both the nun’s path and the sleuth’s path. Similarly, Prince’s character development needed variation and pathos, so therefore in Draft Ten I added scenes that depict his sincere devotion to his one-eyed rescue dog, BonTon.

Charting Shifts from Draft to Draft

Throughout this thesis, particularly in my exegesis of point of view, I refer to my drafting process. Pierre-Marc De Biasi suggests that rough drafts ‘constitute the moment when the project passes from the state of hypothetical scheme to the state of textualized verbal material’. 209 Therefore, I will explain the salient points of major drafts and the correlating significance for my overall narrative method.

The working title of Draft One was Sister Holiday’s Divine Mysteries: Baptism by Fire. The protagonist was originally called Sister Holiday Brennan and I drafted the book in close-

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208 *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 52.
third-person viewpoint. Told mostly in flashbacks, readers experienced Holiday’s younger ruffian days. There was nothing substantive by way of plot in this draft, however. No outline had been created yet. In its initial third-person iteration, the Brooklyn bar fight felt lopsided:

It takes an incredibly precise angle to knock someone out with one punch. Holiday Brennan doesn’t know that angle nor could she guess anything close to it. But she knows pain, she how to make something hurt, so she thrust her fist in the direction of the linebacker’s face.210

As I read more hardboiled works, I became interested in the idea of a dyke dick appropriating or inhabiting classic tropes of hardboiled masculinity while simultaneously parodying the private dicks and critiquing misogyny.

Draft Three was a cumbersome amalgam of close-third person, omniscient, and first person. I settled on the decision to explore first person as the narratorial mode. Converting from close third took many long months, but the change to first person injected the draft with more intimacy and partiality of vision. This is evident when comparing the introduction of the alley in Draft Three (‘Sister Holiday sat out of view, in the alley, on the warped stoop of a disused school exit, smoking a cigarette confiscated from a student earlier that day’) to the alley’s introduction in the final draft (‘the alley behind my school. It was the only place I could smoke. I never bought cigarettes – I wasn’t that dumb’).211 The first-person mode helped to focus the telescope on Sister Holiday as well as on what she sees and feels.

In Draft Six I worked to refine the sleuth as an anti-hero with whom readers could connect. The dynamism of the sleuth is paramount for a multi-book series. I also wanted to evoke New Orleans and Brooklyn in the relevant chapters, providing important information about Holiday’s past. However, after a close read of this draft, I realised that I did not address

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210 The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, Draft Two (2016)
211 The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, Draft Three (2016) and Draft Twelve (2019)
when Holiday started detecting, so I edited the backstory to include Gabriel/Moose’s violent assault.

In Draft Seven, I gave Sister Holiday more verbs and wrote more scenes of her actively sleuthing. She interrogates friends and foes. She feels for clues in the trash and along the classroom cubbies. She thinks she is being watched (‘Eyes were hunting me’); low-grade paranoia simmers.\textsuperscript{212} Additionally, Holiday was too intent on Prince Dempsey’s guilt, so I strived to integrate more ways to convince the reader and other characters that Sister Holiday’s fears were warranted.

Sister Augustine’s confession felt too rushed in Draft Seven, so I created more of a sense of her trying to save the school – and to keep Catholicism alive – earlier in Draft Eight (‘In the hysteria, the faithful were needed again’).\textsuperscript{213} Like Sister Augustine, Bernard Gregory dies in the final fiery blaze, and the two deaths are existentially dismantling for Sister Holiday (‘I don’t have much of anything left’).\textsuperscript{214} I tried to set the opening fire scene and the final blaze at the same register; the intensity of the heat should make the reader wince. Starting on an urgent note only works if the urgency continues to increase, and hence I attempted to draft more nail-biting moments of conflicts, such as Sister Honour and Sister Holiday’s heated scrap in the teacher’s lounge.\textsuperscript{215} I believe that sustained sensorial engagement – the raining sweat, the tender lungs – is a necessary element of the experience of this crime fiction novel. I also constructed two new Prison Birth Centre scenes; Sister Holiday connects with women who are broken. She notices their ‘scars and stories’.

\textsuperscript{212} The Scorched Cross: Draft Seven, p. 73.  
\textsuperscript{213} The Scorched Cross: Draft Seven, p. 140.  
\textsuperscript{214} The Scorched Cross: Draft Eight, p. 331.  
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid., p. 128.  
\textsuperscript{216} Ibid., p. 58
necessary to survive, which also relates to the symbolism of Judith and Holofernes and Sister Augustine’s turn to criminality.

In Draft Nine, I decided to break Chapters One and Two in the middle of fraught high-stakes moments (‘He’s not going to make it’). There is a danger in breaking chapters in acutely tense moments because it is not their natural terminal points, but cliff-hanger types of interruptions can keep readers on the edge of their seats, so to speak, eager to turn the page to discover what will happen next.

Draft Eleven included revisions designed to emphasise the layers of irritants, opposition, and internal and external pressures that create a purgatory for Holiday, such as the curfew, relentless heat, and hysteria from her Sisters, students, and parents who capriciously pull children from her class. Sister Holiday also struggles with her limits and lack of empathy (‘Why was I so hard on Prince? He was broken and damaged, like me’). Ultimately, Sister Holiday should never fully relax into her character. I believe this is useful for the page-turning thrust and sustained suspense I strive to achieve.

The Final Draft

While I originally felt that the narrative device of a confessional booth would lend itself to a structured retelling by the narrator, reader feedback on Draft Twelve revealed that the device was too constricting and contrived. Therefore, I excised the confessional booth in the final draft, Draft Thirteen, to let the narrative breathe.


\[218\] Ibid., p. 235.
After reviewing reader questions about the veracity of certain forensic details in Draft Twelve, I conducted additional research, including secondary interviews and workshops with Detective Sergeant Vic Caputo of the Northampton Police Department and Easthampton, Massachusetts Fire Captain Sandy Krauss. I also consulted with a mechanic and revised the rationale for the explosion of the van to result from a lit cigarette being thrown onto fuel-soaked leaves (‘you parked over dry leaves. Some drunk probably threw a cig. Or a match. The fire started beneath the van’).

Other key plot points were amended so the final draft would hinge more on a structural investigation with an overall queer investigative sensibility. The novel has been revised to more thoroughly present strategic clues and structural evidence, such as (1) the mysterious shadow in the hallway, later revealed to be Sister Augustine, (2) the compulsive frequency of Sister Augustine’s prayer at candle shrine, (3) the burned blouse found in the trash, (4) the calendula burn cream, (5) the guitar pick left on Sister Therese’s body, (6) the cigarettes and alcohol confiscated by the narrator, (7) $100 missing from school till, (8) the grooming of the Prison Birth Centre women to exploit their trust and poach their arson knowledge, (9) the dwindling church congregation as people turn away from the Catholic church, and, ultimately, as readers learn, (10) Sister Holiday’s initial acceptance in the convent, which was a ruse. These clues, including the clues nested within character and the narrative context, were sown strategically to allow readers to get ahead of the narrative and identify Sister Augustine as the culprit. The clues also tie into Sister Holiday’s queer experience and queer sensibility – in other words, her alterity. My ultimate goal was for the central character to achieve the status of a queer sleuth through

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219 ‘She grabbed it with a handkerchief and dropped it into a plastic bag. She shut it tight and placed the evidence bag into another bag.’ The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 84
220 The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 94.
detecting more overtly as part of evolving, incremental, less dumb-luck picaresque plot detours (for example, ‘The job was clean. Extremely precise. Someone practised this – rehearsed this.’).221 Plot connections were fortified to show how the fires stimulate church attendance (as vulnerable people seek reassurance) but shrink school attendance (as worried parents pull their children from class).

Sister Augustine’s character was also developed further. For the final iteration of the novel, the principal’s motivations take root in psychopathy and obsession, which in turn feed themes of masque, ritual, and punishment through auto da fé that seeks ultimately to redeem. In fact, Sister Augustine was deceiving Sister Holiday the entire three years of her novice period, using the gold-toothed novice as bait (‘I accepted you – deviant, sick pervert’).222 For all of Sister Holiday’s tough talk, she was an incredibly easy mark because of her desire to fit in and her overwhelming guilt over Toni’s death (‘The Sisters of the Sublime Blood who advocated for me, unlike my own parents, who would not abandon me, despite my temptations and sins’).223

This revision was also conceived to let the reader tease out the underlying motivations of various main characters. For example, it is revealed that Sister Augustine is secretly harming Prince, meddling with his insulin, exploiting the malcontent teenager in order to disorient him further and increase his reliance on her (e.g, ‘Sister Augustine was the designated health carer for Prince’s diabetes medicine’).224 Sister Augustine also feeds Prince Dempsey and Ryan Brown the contraband – tobacco and alcohol – because she knows Sister Holiday will likely confiscate it.

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221 The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 117.
222 Ibid., p. 316.
223 Ibid., p. 234.
224 Ibid., p. 179.
The scene with Sister Augustine testifying in court was edited after reader feedback. In the final draft, the character has already committed to giving testimony; thus, raising her hand to take the oath reveals her burn. Sister Holiday’s tendency to read between the lines – into the narrow space between sleeve and hand – opens the intuitive window onto the truth. In this regard, it is her queerness that provides both the ability to see, because her survival has depended on a (re)training of the eyes, as well as the method of seeing – habitually reading between the lines.

I revisited the pace and detail of the final section of the novel in order to establish actions and motivations to avoid narrative deceleration and the contrived ‘spill all’. For example, in the penultimate draft, the novel concluded with a community healing yoga class in the school gymnasium. Though there was tense dialogue between Sister Holiday and Riveaux, and Sister Holiday and Rosemary Flynn, there was very little action, and, as a result, readers were disengaged. The novel now ends on the smoky street, immediately following the unexpected and fiery deaths of Sister Augustine and Bernard Gregory.

Reader feedback also flagged the underdevelopment of New Orleans as a setting, so in my revision, I fortified the sense of place with more detail, colour, menace, and suggestion that there is much more than meets the eye (‘wires are buried deep underground’). I also moved the novel toward a more believable set of plot drivers that also tie into the extravagant and carnivalesque sense of New Orleans as a city of apocalyptic Acts of God, emancipation, mystery, ritual, masquerade, and musical rhythms in which the novel is set (‘Haunted elegance … If it’s not grotesque, don’t bother’). While voodoo is often cited as a New Orleans signifier, voodoo has all but died out in the city; I therefore determined it would feel inauthentic to weave in this

225 The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 95.
226 Ibid., p. 65.
practice. I did, however, create a new character named Voodoo, a black feral cat who represents the interstitial space between wild and tame. Voodoo adopts the Saint Sebastian’s garden as her home before the creature is killed by Sister Augustine. This killing also serves as a microcosmic representation of Sister Augustine’s justification of and ease with the crime of murder.

Reader feedback also illuminated the underdevelopment of masquerade and deception themes. Therefore, for the final draft, I enhanced the sense of masquerade throughout the novel, in microcosmic and macrocosmic manifestations, in scenes such as the proxy Mardi Gras where students transform via masks and costumes, and Fleur asks, ‘Why aren’t you wearing a mask?’, to which the protagonist replies, ‘I am.’ There are various permutations of Sister Holiday’s disguise, including wearing make-up, passing as straight when she needs to, and leveraging her inscrutability as needed. The oxygen mask is also used as a salutary tool for Sister Holiday, post-fire – ‘I threw my head back to pray but the mask yanked me forward’ – though it also constrains her.227 Sister Holiday uses other deceptive tactics, such as pretending to be invisible to eavesdrop (‘With my black gloves and scarf – my generic black uniform – and new name, I became just another nun’).228 I also drew more attention to Sister Holiday’s lust for make-up (material used to alter appearance) and high femme signatures when they were unavailable to her. In another aspect of masquerade, the character conceals herself ritualistically with tattoos as Holiday, and then with black garments and gloves as a nun (‘With my black gloves and scarf – my generic black uniform – and new name, I became just another nun. Invisibility was my disguise.’).229

The theme of the tattooed body was also developed to enrich the characterisation and narrative tension. The reader learns more about the relationship between the rebelliousness,

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228 Ibid., p. 48.
229 Ibid., p. 37.
extremist proclivities, desecration as adornment, and the ritualised masochism that led to Sister Holiday’s tattooing (‘My Tree of Life would stay concealed, like every other tattoo, under my generic black nun’s uniform. One self buried under a new one’).

Within this framework, I attempt to exploit tensions between the reading of the ‘surface’ (altered skin) versus the reading or inference of interior depth and its mysteries. I explore the way music has informed part of the character’s decorative impetus. This is another illumination of my critical-into-creative methodology. My analysis of Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones’s theory of a ‘text as evidence’ inspired me to shape a self-aware sleuth character who troubles the notion of deciphering patterns by tattooing herself from neck to toes with contradictory religious iconography. The development of the tattooed body motif – ritualised desecration and consecration – allows for various ‘readings’ of the narrator; the sleuth becomes a mysterious/coded text within a mysterious/coded text (such as ‘She traced the tattoo … anyone who reads music could decipher my code. D-E-F-A-C-E-D’).

Rather than pledging theoretical fealty, or using theory as a centering rubric, the critical work I explored during the Ph.D. helped me expand my thinking and vigorously interrogate craft strategies within a range of alternatives.

**Point of View**

Narrative point of view has been one of the most challenging and intellectually instructive elements of my craft process. In this section of my thesis, I probe my point-of-view rationale, including my revision strategy, in an attempt to understand the mechanics and the effect of my narrative mode on the reader.

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230 *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 60.
231 Ibid., p. 199.
As discussed in the previous section, I appreciate how the third-person point of view can help establish scenes with a wider angle, creating an aerial view of the main character and her world. There is a centrality of pace in the crime novel; therefore, I drafted the first version of this novel in third person in the hopes that it would emphasise action and keep scenes moving swiftly. According to John Gardner, ‘first-person locks us into one character’s mind, locks us into one kind of diction throughout’ and therefore filters everything through that lens. This can give the narration an immediate sense of who this character is, but it can confine readers to a telescopic way of seeing. However, when it became clear that I wanted to explore Sister Holiday’s quirks and inner life more deeply, close-third felt limiting. My protagonist felt flat – two-dimensional instead of three-dimensional. Therefore, in Draft Three, I switched from third person to first person, and while it was an onerous process, I believe it afforded the freedom to create an idiosyncratic worldview, a vision with biases, prejudices, and contradictions.

In the first-person narratorial mode, any unreliability can be credited to the speaker/narrator, her occlusions and interpretations, rather than to a disembodied third-person narrator who fails in their task of omniscience. This sense of partiality, or the incompleteness of that character’s point of view, appeals to me for detective-style storytelling, especially hardboiled narration. What the character witnesses, we witness, and what she fails to see, we too will miss. This mode also offers the possibility of Sister Holiday observing a detail but failing to understand its importance, while leaving the reader the chance to be smarter than sleuth. Additionally, to prove to the reader that this sleuth is intrepid enough for a reader to follow into an inferno, I felt that Sister Holiday, in her own words, should describe or try to describe the

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overwhelming heat and smoke, and the vertigo of losing her orientation and losing a sense of
time (‘stripping away all coordinates’)233

A voice that speaks for itself has a powerful sense of intimacy. When Herman Melville’s
narrator recites *Moby-Dick*’s opening line – ‘Call me Ishmael’, – it is not just a declarative
statement, it is a demand.234 Full stop. Changed to third person, the line might read this way: ‘He
asks them to call him Ishmael,’ or this way, ‘They call him Ishmael’. Those permutations carry
less immediacy and heft. Structure and word order influence how content might be interpreted.
In just three words, ‘Call me Ishmael’, an unknown sailor becomes known and stays known
more than one hundred and sixty years after publication of *Moby-Dick* because the reader
instantly meets a character with confidence and a desire for familiarity.

My novel’s opening line is longer than three words, but its construction adds a similar
inflection on the narrator’s personality. Like *Moby-Dick* and many seminal hardboiled works, my
first-person aesthetic is a method to establish a sense of direct intimacy and let the narrator’s
style become the style of the book. My goal for Sister Holiday as the narrator is to draw attention
to readers’ literal and figurative expectations, starting on page one; she is unafraid to
acknowledge, disappoint, or contradict the reader’s presupposition, mirroring her own
vacillations. Her voice is simultaneously belligerent and resigned. This challenges readers to
confront Sister Holiday as the cognitive architect of her recollection as well as the malleability of
narrative itself. On the first page of the novel, with her declaration that ‘No mystery worth
solving is simple’, Sister Holiday both articulates and obfuscates the sleight-of-hand trick of the
storytelling experience.235 This foreshadows that, for the duration of the novel, she will be

235 *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 3.
instructing us, on her terms, where to look, what to smell, and what to taste, and for how long. I aim to generate this desire by creating various opportunities to experience her narrative predicaments and invest in satisfactory outcomes (‘How long before I sin again?’).236 Do not rely on an orthodox retelling of narrative, Sister Holiday’s own narrative style suggests, because you will not find it here. There is also a Darwinian angle to Sister Holiday’s struggle to recollect and shape her own recollections: humans remember the past to anticipate – and survive – the future.

A first-person point of view can also provide a blueprint for understanding the relationship between causality and morality. The concept of the moral compass is nothing new in crime fiction. The ‘good guys’ versus ‘bad guys’ conceit is an integral aspect of the hardboiled genre. Lee Horsley argues that hardboiled protagonists often crave structure and possess a stubborn sense of right and wrong because they have suffered grave trauma in their own lives.

In the best-known parable of ordinary life disrupted, Dashiell Hammett’s Sam Spade (Maltese Falcon) tells the story of Flitcraft, who comes to realise life’s arbitrariness and absurdity when he is nearly killed by a falling beam.237

Unlike Flitcraft’s recognition of life’s absurdity, in Sister Holiday’s vulnerability a need for order was born. Holiday’s old wounds, including the rape of her brother and her own hand in her mother’s death in the van fire, still animate her. And while Holiday Walsh tries to leave her old life behind and start again in a new city with a new name, her demons follow her in the forms of self-doubt and temptation.

There are other examples of successful deployment of the first-person perspective in detective fiction, especially hardboiled, where point of view and aesthetics are linked. As illustrated in Chandler’s hardboiled passages, the later words in the sentence are often accentuated in some way, to track the emotional beats.

236 Ibid., p. 331.
I like bars just after they open for the evening. When the air inside is still cool and clean and everything is shiny and the barkeep is giving himself that last look in the mirror to see if his tie is straight and his hair is smooth. I like the neat bottles on the bar back ... I like to watch the man mix the first one. I like to taste it slowly.238

In that example, Terry Lenox’s repetition of ‘I like’ creates rhythm and a potent sense of gratification in being present with what he seeks. The scene illustrates another touchstone of hardboiled first-person point of view: succinct sentences designed to be deliberately ordinary, with few or no conjunctions. The characters’ parlance includes everyday words. There is no excessive showing off in the line level. The narration is intimate, as if it were being whispered into your ear. I strive to employ a style that is similar in the regard that the storyteller is in direct contact with the reader. Sister Holiday’s delivery is head-on and intentionally messy; it insists more on her personal style rather than rules of grammar. In my novel of eighty thousand words, there is not one semicolon used. There are only commas, en dashes, and full stops. My goal with my punctuation strategy and intentional omission of semicolons is to establish a distinct and identifiable voice for Sister Holiday (and only Sister Holiday). The shorter lines are also crafted to add to the cumulative velocity, as illustrated in this passage.

Go ahead. Say what you will about Eve. The garden, the apple, the snake. But don’t deny for one second that Eve wasn’t a badass to take what she wanted. A stone-cold queen. And Lilith. And Mary, my pillar, my silent pilot.239

My aesthetic goal with The Scorched Cross is not exclusively choppy lines, but a concise style with a unique tempo. Just as syntax is a storytelling tool so is the disruption of syntax. With fragments adding to the sense of metre, musicality, and fracture, I attempt to distort the character’s diegetic narration (her reconstruction of the events) with prayer to facilitate a story that unfolds in fits and starts and yet threads her reliance on prayer. An example of where this can be seen is when she attacks Prince in a typical hardboiled style of intimidation (‘I lashed his

knees with the ruler … *Hail Mary*’). My goal here is to give the voice a sui generis style and to create a conversational tone that makes you *feel* as if Sister Holiday is talking to herself, to God and Mary, and to the reader simultaneously. Grammatical rules are being broken because this protagonist-sleuth is a rule-breaker even though she has taken temporary vows to abide by specific rules. Expect her to frustrate herself and the reader in turn.

Sue Grafton offers another interpretation of pacey, first-person narration in her chick-dick hardboiled-inspired feminist crime fiction ‘Alphabet’ series. The first page of *A is for Alibi* introduces the reader to the charismatic, strong-willed, and sometimes self-defeating PI.

My name is Kinsey Millhone. I'm a private investigator, licensed by the state of California. I'm thirty-two years old, twice divorced, no kids. The day before yesterday I killed someone and the fact weighs heavily on my mind.

In this passage, Sue Grafton uses a staccato style reminiscent of Mickey Spillane (who she also references, intertextually) to not just show how her protagonist's mind works, but to take us *into* her mind. We learn granular details but we also enter into the rhythm of the narrator’s thoughts. Grafton's sentences are mostly short and unadorned. She furnishes enough information to avoid ambiguity but doesn't indulge in lavish description. This style establishes a rhythm and concision to the storytelling immediately and without pretension. PI Millhone is tough – not overly emotional – but she has a conscience. She kills someone (‘I blew him away’), and while the killing ‘weighs’ on her, she still ticks through the scene's details with precision, as if she is rattling off items on her grocery list. She doesn't want to live in an ornamental world (‘I've lived in trailers most of my life, but lately they've been getting too elaborate for my taste, so now I live in one room’), therefore each word holds meaning. Additionally, Millhone moves swiftly, chasing down suspects with her gun cocked, and her verbal celerity echoes that. It would be

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240 *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 75.
incongruous for Grafton to employ the filigree styling when describing a shoot-first type of PI like Millhone.

Like Kinsey Millhone, Sister Holiday is the narrator and her eyes are the camera lenses for the reader. Once I locked into the direct-address mode, my strategy was to draft the fire scenes, integrating the sensorial details and line variation that would dial up reader engagement. After the fire scenes were constructed, I then returned to the draft to thread in reasons why Sister Holiday would be there. This was not an effective strategy, however. Causal interplay is essential in crime fiction, and the demands of this genre balance conflict with believable characters who readers should want to follow wherever they go, down the mean streets or into burning schools. The details Sister Holiday notices and shares, and how and when she filters or delivers the information, tells us as much about her as it does about the unfolding story. But for the narrative elements to cohere, the timeline and causality must be sound.
**Figurative Language**

The judicious use of figurative language, irony, dark satire, symbolism, and unexpected imagery can help to layer the storytelling experience in a sleuth novel. In praise of Dashiell Hammett’s writing style, Raymond Chandler points to Hammett’s original vision and ability to render scenes in strikingly new ways: ‘He [Hammett] was spare, frugal, hard-boiled, but he did over and over again what only the best writers can ever do at all. He wrote scenes that seemed never to have been written before’. Integral to my narrative method is a similar emphasis on communicating new viewpoints and nudging the reader into new areas – underpinning the sensibility of discovery. I attempt to do this through the use of hyperbole, similes, metaphors, and personification to explore new emotional territories and hitherto undiscovered observations.

Because hardboiled fiction pivots around the sleuth – her likes and dislikes, habits, and detection methodology – and the sleuth herself is the primary lens for interpreting the world, I attempted to incorporate original symbolism as a separate motor of narrative development for Sister Holiday. Literary symbols can take on enhanced significance because they can furnish essential details about a character’s inner worlds. In a closed environment, such as Saint Sebastian’s School, where everyone could potentially be a suspect, the alert reader is actively scanning for clues, and the cross-fertilisation of symbols, such as The Book of Judith, mirrors, the cross, and the crucifix, can reveal important information or be used to mislead the reader. The symbol of the crucifix, for example, provides different data points about whomever is viewing it. Sister Holiday sees sacrifice and Godliness represented in the crucifix she wears

around her neck (‘like the skeleton under my skin, it moved as I moved’), whereas Rosemary Flynn considers the crucifix ‘ghastly’ as an ‘open wound’ and Prince Dempsey sees braggadocio in it (‘Christ is saying, “I’m still here, bitches. Can’t beat me.”’).244

Like symbolism, metaphor and simile can weave in useful subtextual information about characters and plot points into the flow of a dramatized scene. As it – whatever ‘it’ is – sparks in the synapses of the storyteller’s mind, it sparks in ours. The hardboiled school consists of richly varied styles: Spillane favoured brutally spare lines, like bullets, while Chandler stacked metaphors elaborately, and James M. Cain wrote in a straightforward style with a reliance on monosyllabic words that emphasised physical action and imitated reportage (‘We shook hands, and he went. In a minute I heard him singing. He had a swell voice’).245 Nonetheless, to be ‘hardboiled’ is to generally understood as an embrace of the ‘hard’ versus the soft. Hardboiled is commonly cited (and lauded) for its everyday lexicon and linguistic frugality. What, then, are we to make of Raymond Chandler’s craft which relied so heavily on the metaphor and the simile, sometimes piling four similes into one paragraph? In the Long Goodbye, Marlowe asserts that ‘All tough guys are monotonous. Like playing cards with a deck that’s all aces. You’ve got everything and you’ve got nothing’.246 This moment is memorable because of the stunning originality of the comparison and the vice inherent in it. The repetition of ‘you’ve got’ and fragmentation imbues the section with distinct beats and musicality. The simile is also split into three fragments that when synced together make a whole. Stephen King confides, ‘My all-time favorite similes, by the way, come from hardboiled-detective fiction of the forties and fifties ... I lit a cigarette [that] tasted like a plumber’s handkerchief’ (Raymond Chandler’).247

244 The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 86.
I strive to foreground similarly eloquent yet gritty figurative language in my practice. For example, when Sister Holiday smokes in the alley – a transgressive moment in a ‘blind spot’ – she remarks that ‘the crescent moon floats like a talon’. A talon is usually associated with a bird of prey, a killer, and this image reveals the menace lurking in the narrator’s mind. But the feeling doesn’t have to end with peril. As Gaston Bachelard writes about poetic imagery in *The Poetics of Space*, ‘Through the brilliance of an image, the distant past resounds with echoes, and it is hard to know at what depth these echoes will reverberate and die way’.248 While genre readers are, arguably, engaging with a puzzle in order to solve the mystery, inference is still crucially important, and figurative language can provide opportunities for varied interpretations. There should still be space for discovery within a genre-recognisable work. In another example from Chapter One of my novel – ‘Smoke reached down through the ceiling, unfurling with sick elegance, like black irises’ – the simile helps to train the reader’s eye on where to look. The juxtaposition (‘sick’ with ‘elegance’) suggests the narrator’s unusual worldview.249 And while metaphors and similes achieve a similar effect – comparing different objects for a desired effect – the latter is more conscious than the former. However, Stephen King reminds writers that ‘symbolism exists to adorn and enrich, not to create a sense of artificial profundity’.250 Too many ‘like’ or ‘as’ comparisons risk bogging down exposition and diluting the desired effect, however, so it is incumbent on the writer to find the right ratio of description to action.

After reflecting critically on the craft elements of crime fiction, and exploring how key theories might influence my practice, I have learnt that the content-driven factors of drafting, such as motif, character development, and atmosphere, come more naturally to me as a writer.
have realised that, before my Ph.D., the technical construction of form, plot, and logistics were secondary factors in my method. This is partially due to my formative experience as a poet and an ongoing interest in imagery-driven poetry as a creative practice. To realise my broader writing ambitions, however, it is clear that my craft methodology must foreground structure and structural clues. I have begun the next Sister Holiday novel – *The Blessed Water* – with a precise outline of plot points in concert with the ecosystem of the novel (place, mood, tone, atmosphere). Beginning with an outline that shows how structural clues, temporal, and character elements operate will help to ensure a more consistent reading experience and more economical writing experience. In no way do I believe this process amendment will make my crime fiction process less imaginative. To the contrary, I argue that the constraints of sleuth fiction are vehicles conducive to exploring ideology and consciousness, and therefore the writer who can access a poetic sensibility within the constraints may possess a unique advantage. Take, for example, this section of *The Big Sleep* which Grant Tracey considers ‘one of the most elegiac insights’ in Raymond Chandler’s novel, an organization of rhetorical questions and observations that plunges Marlowe deeper into the ‘world of the pyrrhic’.

> What did it matter where you lay once you were dead? In a dirty sump or in a marble tower on top of a high hill? You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that. Oil and water were the same as wind and air to you. You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell.

Language like this – language that feels alive, via syntactical originality, luminous yet grounded metaphor, repetition, and word choice – electrifies the page, even in a voiceover containing no action. I also strive to sink Sister Holiday into the ‘nastiness’, in a hardboiled-inspired sense, vis-à-vis the character’s personal and professional danger, by crafting language with similar vitality.

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that serves my accretive storytelling ambitions, language that generates its own heat and gravity for the characters and supports the novel’s thematic synthesis regarding the conflicts of adversarial yet imbricated queer, religious, and vocational identities.
Conclusion

After writing one-hundred thousand words over five years, and editing the novel down to eighty thousand words, I now have a thirteenth and final draft of a sleuth novel, *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*. In the creation of this novel and the simultaneity of the rigorous reflection that drove the creation of this thesis, I have aimed to sharpen my ability to merge criticality and creativity, integrating literary criticism and theory and queer theory into my writing. An aspiration for my crime-fiction practice is to speak two languages at once: writing a whodunit that works on the macro genre level (presenting a mystery to be solved) and the micro narrative level (creating dynamic queer characters with whom readers might want to spend time and who might introduce thematic variations).

An investigation of a crime is itself a structural experience, and, as such, a novel that centres an investigator requires solid and consistent structural treatment. Only through reader feedback/engagement and the revision process did I realise the paramount importance of structure as a process of engagement. I realised I took too much for granted in early drafts, playing more to subtlety and subtext rather than hard, structural clues that also reiterated the queer sensibility. While texture and atmosphere invite creative touches, and restraint in dialogue is one of my ambitions, structural subtlety is a luxury not available to a crime writer. Only late in the drafting process, after the reader feedback on Draft Twelve, when the arduous work of fixing logistical problems took significant time, did I realise how critically important it is to start with a bulletproof blueprint of plot points and causal evidence. I spent months engaged in retroactive plotting, clarifying the timeline and patching up plot holes, like pouring tar to fill potholes, crater
after crater, rather than resurfacing the entire road. While the imaginative spirit of a piece is still my primary inspiration, I have learnt that in order to actualize the thematic and stylistic synthesis I seek, it is crucially important to start with a technical engineering plan. Fine-print plot details – essential for sustained suspense and the overall investigative flow – are like the load-bearing walls that keep an edifice standing. This new structural awareness was a eureka moment for me, and it has challenged me to dramatically revise my workflow. I now consider detective novels as exercises in engineering in which character, setting, theme, plot concerns, and structure carrying equal weight. Like Eliot, I admire the detective genre for its requirement to innovate within constraints (‘the beauty of the mathematics problem’), and I also appreciate the puzzler for its exacting requirements.

Besides illuminating how my crime fiction practice needs to evolve in order to further my ambitions, I benefited from a scrupulous examination of genre. Genre is a term that implies both style and form, and as such it invites interpretation. Nonetheless, a detective story still hinges on a crime or a mystery and the subsequent detection of clues. In Chapter One of this thesis, I outline notable approaches to the cause-and-effect and cat-and-mouse nature of detective novels, from eloquent Golden Age mysteries to gritty hardboiled romps. Since my novel chronicles an amateur sleuth struggling to unmask the identity of a serial arsonist as well as to understand herself in her new role as a Catholic Sister, I found the hardboiled register particularly constructive.

In Chapter Two I itemise the influence of gender and queer theory on my reflection practice and in the creation of my novel. I document the challenges and opportunities of trying to write a thrilling work of crime fiction that can also provide social comment. To that end, a major

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253 Major plot holes included why Sister Honour hates Sister Holiday, how long does it take to question all the Saint Sebastian’s students, why was there no funeral for Jack or Sister Therese, and what happened to the burnt blouse.
breakthrough occurred when I analysed classic hardboiled novels alongside their feminist and queer counter-traditions, as if the books were in conversation with one another. Reading these popular texts, I became interested in narrative strategies that transposed the hardboiled code of virility into a quirky lesbian protagonist. Stephen King notes that ‘The real importance of reading is that it creates an ease and intimacy with the process of writing’. The more I read (past tense) and read (present tense) and the more I engage with this living genre, the closer I get to crafting a signature queer hardboiled practice and voice.

Ultimately, I believe that applying queer analysis and accenting queer storylines in crime fiction, as I do in my novel, can situate a sleuth on the margins of heteronormativity, thereby affording her skills that are particularly useful for a problem-solver, such as decoding, translation, and inference. Engaging with Katherine V. Forrest’s laconic Detective Delafield and Sue Grafton’s tough-as-nails PI Millhone, for example, invited a discourse about what ‘law and order’ might look like from a contemporary queer feminist perspective. Researching and conceptualising Chapter Two in concert with drafting my novel, I began to crystallise how and why an anti-heroic lesbian portrayal with nuanced gender and religious expressions might innovate the sleuth genre. Furthermore, to remix, reinterpret, and reimagine tropes in a narrative method is fundamentally aligned with queer ideals. The Western contemporary usage of the word ‘queer’ is, at its heart, a reclamation. Defined as ‘strange’ or ‘odd’, the word queer is now used and understood as an umbrella term for people who are not heterosexual or not cisgender. The architects of queer liberation made a strenuous effort (and in many ways the effort is ongoing) to take this word back from the confines of a pejorative to recast it as a symbol of radical empowerment and recognise an evolving, inclusive, and fluid community.

In Chapter Three I reflected on craft, detailing my struggles and moments of enlightenment with point of view, temporality, and plot. A probing examination during this process clarified that was not enough beat-by-beat action in Part Two of my novel. The middle 150 pages sagged, containing very little causation. The first draft had no deaths and the original ending let the sleuth off the hook far too easily. When I focussed too much on Sister Holiday’s visceral reality or interior geography, the looseness of plot trapped the reader in a holding pattern. Conceptualising the flow of Chapter Three helped me formulate more persuasive red herrings. I realised that the Prince-Holiday enmity was not persuasive. More friction and suspicious moments were needed to warrant the obsession and enmity. Similarly, funnelling all of the ‘narrative past’ into Part Two created a host of logistical problems, and the revision of temporality – the interleaving into marbled flashbacks – proved to be one of the more instructive edits in my process.

Working on Chapter Three of the thesis also elucidated the need to layer opposition for the sleuth. In fact, it was in ideating more critically about the irritant concept, while drafting Chapter Three, that I decided to give Sister Holiday scar tissue after the last fire. The itchy wound yokes the young nun to the older nun, to Sister Augustine’s burn, and locks Sister Holiday in a state of discomfort and pain as the story concludes. These details, growing cumulatively in their effect, helped me to raise the stakes for the characters and, hopefully, the reader. I tried to make the smells more fetid, the trash slimier, the pinches harder, and the temptations juicer. My goal with the last draft was to push the walls in on the protagonist. What I discovered, clarified by refining Chapter Three of this thesis, is that by piling on more pressure – and keeping the pressure consistent – the book read faster.
After reader feedback in 2019, I addressed fourteen key issues in my final revision with the overall goal of fully realising a believable detective fiction narrative and embodying its key characteristic as a carnivalesque masque of disguise and revelation. The final revisions included the aforementioned temporal editing and the excision of the narrative device of the Catholic confessional to let the novel breathe.

For the final draft, I also revised the inciting incident, a modification I explored in Chapter Three. This edit also seeds the fire/flame symbolism into Holiday’s past and introduces fire as a force of reckoning, recalibrating Sister Holiday’s guilt from general to specific, as it was presented in earlier drafts.

My central thesis, that the ‘queering’ of investigative sensibility enhances and informs the PI’s perception, should now be discernable throughout the final draft. The elements of Holiday’s identity/perception that are related to a queer identity are a capacity to decipher codes, reading for subtext, reading between the lines, and inhabiting alterity to garner unexpected insights. I revised the queer element significantly and layered it with the unique abilities of a purpose-driven religious sleuth (such as Sister Holiday’s belief that solving the mystery can serve as her ‘offering’ to God). This was undertaken in support of my ambition to establish original storytelling methods for queer-religious sleuths.

I attempted to enhance the theme of musicality with more research, optimizing the rich symbolism of the ‘instrument’ and intensifying tension between the dissident ‘punk’ and ‘melodic’ sides of Sister Holiday (e.g., ‘Bringing a whole sonic palette – pushing and pulling – into conversation. Thrashing power chords … It’s a form of whole-body prayer.’). 255

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For as much as I was able to include in this thesis, there are notable elements of my process I did not have the space to examine. I did not have the opportunity to explicate the aesthetics of sex scenes. As a queer narrative, the sex scenes – their level of detail, and how they are interpreted and communicated by Sister Holiday in her reconstruction – are important for both overall narrative flow and her characterisation. There is a hardboiled genre expectation for titillation; narrativising sex and violence are methods of delivering excitement of this ilk, particularly in the hardboiled thrillers of Mickey Spillane, for example. There is a cost to omitting a critical reflection of the rendering of sex scenes, as the topic is both useful and fascinating theoretical territory within the queer context. I plan to explore the role of queer eroticism and the craft of sex scenes in crime fiction in future critical studies.256

Similar to deconstructing the creation of and theories on sex scenes and the depiction of Sister Holiday’s amorous yearnings, I was also unable to apply a racial analysis to the novel or critically explore the role of race within the New Orleans setting. A novel set in the storied setting of New Orleans – a city of miracles and curses – would benefit from an intersectional discussion of race, class, identity, agency, and criminality. Additionally, Investigator Riveaux’s character is African-American (‘first black female fire investigator in New Orleans’), and her foil is crucially important for the sleuth.257 I hope to explore this aspect of my crime fiction practice in the continuation of my critical work next year.

From an immersive sense of place, to the gold tooth of the nun who narrates the tale, my ultimate goals were to create a novel with literary merit that breaks new ground in terms of its

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256 In 2019, I received a Sisters In Crime (SInC) Academic Research Grant to continue critical work on sexuality and intersectionality in lesbian hardboiled detective fiction. ‘Founded by Sara Paretsky in 1986, Sisters in Crime is a community of writers, editors, publishers, scholars, and librarians devoted to promoting the ongoing advancement, recognition, and professional development of women and underrepresented crime writers’. <https://www.sistersincrime.org>

257 The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery, p. 28.
thematic and stylistic synthesis by offering an original variation on the sleuth story within a broader conversation about identity politics, life purpose, and self-awareness. I believe that even if you know ‘the reveal’, a detective novel should still be enticing enough to want to take the literary journey. That maxim inspires everything I write, including *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*. To that end, the final draft represents a radical reshaping of the narrative of the early versions. While the arsonist has been unmasked by the time readers reach the novel’s conclusion, Sister Holiday rejects tidy closure. This is another code of hardboiled.\textsuperscript{258} Sister Holiday is still selfish as the novel closes, but she recognises and articulates that she is a work in progress (‘will I take permanent vows?’).\textsuperscript{259} My hope is that readers have enough confidence in her character to follow her queer sleuthing instincts into the next book in the series.

I also believe that the first-person voice and hardboiled attributes have made the novel richer and simultaneously provided a doorway into a larger project – exploring the pedogeological value of intersectionality, intertextuality, and multimodality in crime fiction. My contention is that intertextuality and intersectionality can expand the crime fiction conversation. If, for example, Dashiell Hammett is to be referenced as a model for students who wish to write crime fiction, the discussion could entail not just his writerly strategies for creating a sense of place, itemising the costs of isolation, how to render deceptive characters, but also how historical context informs the reader’s comprehension of social strata, notions of authenticity, and the performativity of gender. A rigorous reading of Hammett’s *Maltese Falcon* (a third-person hardboiled novel featuring white heterosexual PIs) alongside Cheryl A. Head’s *Bury When I’m

\textsuperscript{258} ‘Because hard-boiled novels don’t resolve as neatly as the puzzle-like “Golden Age” mysteries that they supplanted, they create a fundamental ambiguity about whether order has in fact been restored and justice has been done. This ambiguity (for hard-boiled novels regularly question whether justice is even possible) draws consistently on literary sentimentalism for its imagery and symbolic lexicon’. –Leonard Cassuto, *Hard-Boiled Sentimentality: The Secret History of American Crime Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 81.

\textsuperscript{259} *The Scorched Cross: A Sister Holiday Mystery*, p. 331.
Dead: A Charlie Mack Motown Mystery (a third-person hardboiled style novel featuring a black lesbian PI), invites a discussion about the relationship between third-person point-of-view and the individualised self, privilege and power/powerlessness, strategies for writing ironic distance, and violence within a queer crime fiction framework.

Similarly, a crime fiction pedagogy that also considers queer theory would be enriched by multimodal engagement – reading, critically exploring, watching, expanding on, intervening in, and interacting with myriad permutations of PI storytelling. In the Creative Writing workshop, this might take the form of analytical work (the historical contexts and evolution of the genre and subgenres through a queer deconstructionist lens), and multimodal engagement that spurs creative synthesis among canonical fiction models, videogames, mobile apps, and private-eye TV programmes. I envisage a workshop in which students attempt to visualise or map the narrative space of Marlowe’s Los Angeles, change the genders of certain characters to see what narrative possibilities emerge, or write new endings and dialogue for shows like Jessica Jones or Veronica Mars that parody Cain, Spillane, Paretsky, or Grafton. These inquiries and exercises would present writers not only with an assortment of storytelling devices from which to choose, it could spark ‘an awareness of the political effects of aesthetic decisions’, according to Paul Dawson. Exercises of this ilk might inspire and challenge students to give voice to the otherwise voiceless.

In this application, crime fiction can occupy space in a larger discussion about the relationship between diversity, inclusion, and cultural (re)production. Priscilla L. Walton and

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Manina Jones argue that contemporary women writers who appropriate the hardboiled style reclaim the territory ‘as a viable (if limited) locus of feminist analysis’ and make ‘the hardboiled narrative of investigation available as an instrument of literary and social critique’.262 Again this illuminates the generative relationship between criticality and creativity for queer crime fiction writers. Similarly, rather than bifurcating – severing theory from creative practice – this programme has served as an integrative enterprise for me. I believe the expansive engagement of a critical-into-creative method – and the creative-into-critical mode in turn – represents the important role of the Creative Writing Ph.D. in the academy and wider artistic discourse.

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*Forbrydelsen* (Denmark, 2007)

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The Kettering Incident (Australia, 2016)
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Kiss Kiss Bang Bang (USA, 2005)
Luther (UK, 2010)
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Moonlighting (USA, 1985)
Paranoid (UK, 2016)
Agatha Christie’s Poirot (UK, 1989)
Prime Suspect (UK, 1991)
Sherlock (UK, 2010)
Top of the Lake (Australia/UK/New Zealand, 2012)
Vera (UK, 2011)
V.I. Warshawski (USA, 1991)
Witnesses (France, 2014)
The Scorched Cross:
A Sister Holiday Mystery

Margot Douaihy
pray for us sinners
Chapter 1

No mystery worth solving is simple. And it never starts where you’d think. A sleight-of-hand trick begins off to the side, in a blind spot, like the alley behind my school. It was the only place I could smoke. I had no money for cigarettes, of course, but what I confiscated from my students was fair game. Waste is a sin. Not a deadly sin but sinful all the same. So, there I was in the alley, Goddamned gloves and scarf on, minding my own business. A rare moment alone. The concrete steps offered relief from the heat. A freight train drowned out drunken laughter from the street. I ran the stolen cig under my nose, sniffed it, and lit it with the last match in the book. Fine tobacco. Probably an import. Saint Sebastian’s students were a bunch of fuckers, but their drugs were superior to the garbage I smoked in Brooklyn. A crescent moon floated like a talon. Frogs croaked in the privacy of their night disguise. A creaky chorus, the New Orleans nocturne. I took another drag and the back of my throat went sour. My eyes watered as a wave of heat slapped me. An ember must have fallen from my cigarette tip, but there was nothing on the ground. Nothing on my lap.

Then it jumped. A smear of colour in my peripheral vision. Red lashed against black night.

Fire. *Again.* This time it was my school blazing.

The east wing of Saint Sebastian’s was burning. A second-floor window broke as livid flames stabbed through it. “Dear God, not again.” I dropped my cigarette and ran towards the main doors. Black smoke billowed as another window blew.

It was Sunday night. The doors were locked after our meeting. Surely no students
were inside, but I had to know. The door handle was not yet hot, so I placed my short scarf over my mouth like a bandit and unlocked the door. Had to steady my right hand with my left as I turned the key. Smoke and heat blasted into me.

“Hey!” I sprinted down the hallway screaming, coughing. “Anybody here?”

Smoke dripped through ceiling cracks, unfurling with sick elegance, like black irises.

The fire alarm on the wall was stiff, impossible to pull, even for me and my stubborn strength. Pulling so hard my shoulder started to go. Old metallic red paint flaked off as I tugged. I screamed at it, as if that would help. The lever finally budged and clicked down, sounding a shrill alarm that would shake the dead. No sprinklers activated.

I ran towards the second floor. The heat on the stairwell forced me back. More rumbling as the blaze howled, one floor above. The smoke was strangely alive. Venomous smoke and soot.

“Anybody here?” My throat was raw. “Hello!”

I ran up stairwell and heard more glass shatter. Second floor? Third? Smoke enveloped me. I was lost in my own damn school.

“Help!” a voice yelled. The floor quaked. “We need help!”

“I’m cut,” hollered another voice. “Help us!”

The corridor was empty. The cries had to be coming from one of the classrooms. Nothing was where it should have been.

Smoke held me in place, taunted me, like a straightjacket. The fire was too fast, too big. Glass breaking. Toxic smoke. Just like in Brooklyn, the night of ignition. The night everything changed. Would I ever be free of it?
I ran to another room. “You there?” I kicked classroom doors open. Nothing.

The smoke was thick, but I saw something – someone – running at the end of the hallway. “Hey!” I choked as I ran toward them. “Hey!” The shadow disappeared as quickly as it came into view. Been waiting my whole life to see the Holy Ghost, and it had to be there? If bad timing was a religion, I’d be the damn pope.

The cries amplified. I turned around, tried to follow the voices. Heat had cracked a transom, hurling glass in a dozen directions, into the old religion classroom. The door was open and inside the room, squashed on the floor, were Jamie and Lamont.

“What on earth?” I choked as I ran to my students.

“He’s cut!” Lamont pointed to Jamie’s leg where blood poured from his thigh. Blood as demented as the fire eating the walls.

“Dear Lord. What happened?”

“We were running out. Glass fell on top of us.”

Jamie winced as he held the outsides of his left thigh. “Get it out!” A wedge of broken glass, the size of two open hands, stuck out of his thigh. He howled as he put his hands on the glass. It was lodged deep. “Get it out of me! I’m going to puke.”

“Close your eyes!” Lamont held Jamie’s shoulder. “Don’t look.”

“Maybe we should leave the glass in.” Lamont touched Jamie’s leg, making the poor boy scream and writhe.

I had never seen anyone that feral. Except myself, that night.

Another classroom window exploded. Jamie’s eyes began to close.

I grabbed Lamont’s face. His mouth and eyes twisted in fear. “Get up! We need to move Jamie,” I whispered. “He’s losing too much blood. He’s not going to make it.”
“Lamont, stand up and help me!” My scarf was soaked with sweat, tears, saliva.

“I can’t.” He coughed. “My ankle snapped.”

Jamie roared as he touched the glass in his thigh. “Get it out of me!”

I pressed his leg with my left hand. “Okay, okay,” I whispered, trying to steady myself and the boys. Pulling the glass out seemed risky, but he was squealing and fighting hard, like he was getting carved alive by a butcher. “One, two,” I said, and on “three,” using my glove for traction, I pulled the blood-slimed glass out of Jamie’s thigh. He howled and shook as purple blood flowed hard, as if from a fire hydrant. Bits of his gore remained on the glass. On my gloves. His legs trembled. The glass had slashed his flesh, exposed the red meat of muscle, the horror of tissue.

Smoke turned black overhead as more colour drained out of Jamie’s face. Blood wouldn’t stop gushing. It spilled over both sides of his pulpy thigh. Nothing prepares you for the cruel, dark wet of an open wound. Hail Mary.

I ripped off my scarf – the thin black cloth Sister Augustine made me wear – and tied it tightly around Jamie’s leg. A quick tourniquet. A flaming ember shot into my left eye – “Fuck” – like an axe landing in my cornea. I tried to blink but couldn’t. Hot tears flowed. “Lamont, get up.”

Lamont whimpered. “I can’t stand up. My ankle snapped.”

“Crawl! I can’t carry you both.”

“I can’t move.”

“Dammit.” I looked at Jamie, then Lamont. “I’m taking Jamie out. Then I’m
coming back for you.”

“No!” Lamont coughed. “Please don’t leave me here! I can’t breathe.” He grabbed my shirt, dragged me down. A button flew off my blouse.

I pushed Lamont’s hand away. “I’m taking Jamie out now. Then I’m coming back.” He reached for my shirt again, his eyes red with terror. I pushed him down hard. Smoke flooded the room. “Get your hands together and pray. Control your breath. Sips of air. Only sips. I can’t breathe for you.”

I tightened the tourniquet around Jamie’s thigh and slapped him on the face. “Stay awake.” He was ashen. I placed his left arm around my shoulders and lifted him from his waist. “Up!” Like a drunk couple on a cheap jazz honeymoon on Bourbon Street, we hobbled as one being. He was a foot taller than me and had an entire gym’s worth of boxers’ muscles, but I lifted him. Adrenaline raged in my veins like the uppers I used to snort, like the divine surge of Godly strength in the fables I came to love.

_Hail Mary, I whispered, Mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness, our hope. To thee we do cry, banished children of Eve._

Go ahead. Say what you will about Eve. The garden, the apple. But don’t deny for one second that Eve wasn’t a badass to take what she wanted. A stone-cold queen. And Lilith, misunderstood. And Mary, my pillar, my silent pilot.

“Don’t leave me!” Lamont coughed ferociously.

Jamie pulled us both down as he collapsed. “I can’t do it.”

“Shut up and walk.” I squeezed my arms around Jamie’s waist. His deadweight was hard, crushing as a wooden cross. Impossible to control. Somehow I kept us moving. Smoke flooded the classroom as Jamie and I limped into the hallway. The
alarm was still blaring, fire ripping through the second floor. Lamont cried and cried on the ground.

I tried to steady Jamie as we fought our way to the door. Even with my eyelid shut, my left eye stung. Blood had soaked through Jamie’s tourniquet. My nostril hair and lips burned.

I led us to the stairwell on the other side of the wing. It was smokier than the stairs I had run up. Jamie’s eyes were open, but his gaze was empty. I pinched his bicep hard.

“Argh!”

“Focus.”

That’s when I saw him on the stairwell landing. “Jack!” I screamed. “Oh my God, Jack.”

Jack Corolla – one of Saint Sebastian’s janitors, thirty-three years old, like me, with almost as many tattoos as me, and enormous black earlobe plugs – lay motionless on the concrete floor, eyes open. He was wearing his custodian’s coveralls. His ladder and toolbox were lying beside him.

“Jack.” I kicked his leg. He didn’t flinch. “Jack. Jackie, get up.” He didn’t blink or breathe. His face was grey, distant, like the fresco of Saint Peter. Kind eyes, empty, gone. I kicked him again in the shin. He was stiff.

“Is he dead?” whispered Jamie.

“Don’t look,” I said. “Jack. Come on!” I had to hold Jamie up – I couldn’t reach down – so I kicked him again, but he didn’t move.

Janitors did most of their cleaning at night, but a Sunday night? Did Jack
follow me into the wing? Was he trying to fix the fire sprinkler or save us when smoke
overcame him? How can smoke, something that cannot even be held, extinguish a human
life? Twice now I’ve seen it. Fire, smoke. Like diabolical hunger – relentless. I know
death is gunning for me. For all of us, eventually. But if I can outrun it, I will.

Jamie, barely conscious, murmured, “He’s dead.”

“Keep moving.”

The walls had turned from white to brown. As we reached the ground floor, a
different alarm began to sound. The tall, heavy emergency fire doors of Saint Sebastian’s
east wing started to move slowly.

The doors were locking us in.

Jamie sagged, couldn’t keep his head up.

I slapped his cheek hard. “We’re getting out of here.” I surprised myself with
the jolt of energy the word we imparted.

I kicked my foot into the main door and pushed all of my and Jamie’s weight
into it, one breath before the magnetised fire doors sealed the east wing shut behind us.

_Hail Mary. Hail Eve. Don’t leave us._

I grunted as we fell outside.

The wail of police sirens and fire engines hit my eardrums. A fire truck
screeched to a stop in front of us as we stumbled out of the school’s east-wing entrance.
Firemen and women leapt off, unravelled their orange and red fire hoses, and ran to the
blazing school.

Jamie collapsed on the ground, dry-heaving. A fireman helped me as I fell. “I
have to” – I coughed – “get back inside.”
“Nope,” he said.

“There’s a student in there.”

“Where?”

“Second floor, street-side.”

The night air was thrilling and sickening, like a gulp of swamp water.

I crawled closer to Jamie. His body shook as two EMTs loaded him onto a gurney and wheeled him to an ambulance, shouting about stabilising the gash in his leg. He’d lost so much blood. Blood is sacred, the river into the next world. To be saved for communion. To see it escape was unholy.

How long had the east wing been ablaze? Five minutes? Ten? Smoke floods a space, stripping away all coordinates, time, any certainty of up or down. My black polyester trousers seared into my skin. I tried to stand and fell with a crack. I tried again, stood up this time, wobbled in the direction of the east wing door to get Lamont.

A fireman in a large black helmet and long jacket with neon stripes jumped in front of me. His hands were raised in front of him. “Nope. No way,” he said. “Sorry, hon. Stay here.”

“Lamont.”

“They’re getting him.” I fell again, wheezing. I had to drag Lamont out, but I couldn’t breathe let alone walk. My chest felt like it had been trampled by a thousand boots in a Mardi Gras parade. “Jack too. Stairwell. Not moving.”

“On it,” he said calmly, as he and two others ran towards the east wing with large silver medical cases under their arms.

Jamie whimpered under his oxygen mask.
A firewoman, helmet clipped under her chin so tight it tugged her skin, and an EMT ran towards the inferno. The firewoman clutched an axe with two hands as she ran. There was a strange elation in her face as she darted towards the blaze.

_Hail Mary._

I needed to feel cold ground underneath me. I crawled onto a patch of hard crabgrass. Lay down flat. I choked trying to catch my breath, like reaching for a hand that kept pulling away. My blood was boiling, trying to jump out of my skin.

In front of me was a small wooden cross on the grass. It must have fallen off the wall, launched out of a classroom when a window blew. Or it had been hit with powerful water from a fire hose. One section of the cross was scorched, burnt down to the stub. It looked as if it could be carried easily, like a gun. I wanted to hold it close. I reached for it, but two men scooped me up, their strong hands under my armpits. They took me to the back of an idling ambulance where the EMTs created had created a staging area. A plastic oxygen mask was placed over my nose and mouth.

“Breathe in, breathe out,” a medic instructed, as if she were talking two a two-year-old. “She’s stable but has debris in her cornea and nostrils.” They said much more, but all I heard were echoes. Another medic irrigated my eyes, placed a patch over my left eye.

A ladder truck repositioned itself near the hydrants and arranged two orange hoses in a line on First Street. I was frozen even though I had sweated through my blouse. Ash rained onto the palm trees. The blaze had a life, and rules, of its own. Just like in Brooklyn, I was powerless to stop it.

“You’re okay,” said a woman in metal-framed glasses, jeans, and a grey blouse
with sopping sweat marks under her armpits. “Got a serious piece of ash in that eye.” She shone a flashlight for a better look at my face. “You’ll be fine. Who are you?” Her ID was clipped to her wide belt. My eyes were too watery to read her name.

I tore off my eye patch, choked into the mask the medic had placed over my mouth.

Roy, a homeless man with white hair and a long white beard, who often slept on Saint Sebastian’s campus, slipped past the police line and charged at the ambulance to talk to me. “You alright?”

“Get him out of here!” The woman with the badge flapped her arms as her colleagues quickly escorted Roy behind the yellow tape. “Lock this area down, for fuck’s sake.” She looked at me. “Inhale.” She tightened the breathing apparatus over my mouth. “I’m Fire Investigator Magnolia Riveaux, New Orleans Fire Department. Keep breathing.”

I pulled the mask from my mouth. “Lamont is inside,” I rasped. I was too weak to put the mask on again. The investigator helped me with steady hands.

“Our folks are on it.” She pointed to Roy. “Get his statement,” she instructed her colleagues.

My Sisters – Honour, Augustine, Lourdes, and Therese – hurried towards me. Sister Augustine’s eyes were as solemn as the black veil framing her face. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Praise, praise,” Sister Therese said. “You saved them.” She hugged me.

“Halleluiah.”

“Dios mío,” said Sister Lourdes. “Thank you, Jesus!”
Sister Honour covered her mouth with her hand. “How could you leave Lamont inside?”

“Please,” said Sister Therese, “how could she be expected to carry two boys at once?”

Saint Sebastian’s lay staff, Rosemary Flynn and John Vander Kitt, joined the huddle at the back of the ambulance, behind the police line. We had ended our monthly meeting in the teachers’ lounge twenty minutes before the fire began. It was the meeting I usually skipped. Not that night.

Bernard Gregory, our school’s other janitor, was sobbing. “Jack!”

“Jamie and Lamont.” I gasped for air. “They okay?”

“They have Lamont in that ambulance.” Investigator Riveaux pointed a long finger towards the idling vehicle across the courtyard. “He inhaled serious smoke, but he’ll be okay. Jamie’s banged up bad. Jack is beyond this world.”

I threw my head back to pray but the mask yanked me forward. I pulled it off and choked. Lamont had ripped off a shirt button, and two more had popped off while I carried Jamie. Riveaux studied my exposed skin, squinted as she tracked my tattoos. LOST and SOUL were tattooed on my knuckles. Across my throat was a serene scene, Eve holding her apple. The palindrome DEIFIED was inked in glittering green and gold cursive, sinister in its opulence, like the snake in the garden of Eden, across the length of my chest. It was my most painful tattoo. A reminder of the price of selfishness, of what’s at stake when you think only of yourself, no matter how good it tastes. It was also a favourite because I could read it in the mirror. Not that we had mirrors in the convent.

“Nice grill.” The investigator pointed at my gold tooth. “What’s your name?”
“Holiday Walsh. I mean, Sister Holiday Walsh.”

“Sister?”
I sat at the back of the open ambulance. It was idling to keep the air conditioner working. Medics told me twice to lie down as they took my vitals, but I kept sitting up on the bleached white sheet of the stretcher to watch the flames.

Fire hoses blasted the east wing. Water seemed to make the flames bite back harder. I blinked, trying to scan the grass for the scorched cross again. I could hardly see. My eyes were stinging. My legs felt dead, unattached.

Neighbours, students, and news reporters huddled in the street. Their voices and cries joined the clamour of sirens. One of my students, Arjune Ruiz, took photos with his phone until he was shooed away by cops.

Investigator Riveaux’s radio hissed with voices. Cryptic codes, crosstalk. Within minutes the entire second floor of the east wing was engulfed. Orange flames, black smoke, and the epileptic flash of emergency lights smeared the air.

Medics prodded me on the gurney. The cool stethoscope on my back felt good. “Pulse oximetry, okay.” They took my blood pressure, listened to my heart. “Blood pressure, 88/60. Okay. She’s pushing it, but the edge of normal. Take it again in ten.”

Firefighters sawed down a tree, a thick mossy oak, so they could inch a ladder engine closer to the east wing. From the engine’s long crane, two firemen aimed the fire hoses at the blaze. Every street-facing window had blown by then.
I sucked the soft air of the respirator, ripping the mask off every thirty seconds to cough. I needed to spit – soot coated my teeth – but my mouth was too dry, my tongue like gravel.

Investigator Riveaux sat next to me on the lip of the open ambulance. She crossed her legs at the ankles. She was extremely skinny. The kind that makes you worry. As she looked at the flaming wing, she nodded. “Fierce. Fierce.”

Saint Sebastian’s School was built in a “U” design: a main hall with east and west wings that fanned out on either side like a horseshoe. One side of the east and west wing windows faced each other. Our church, convent, and rectory were on the other side of Prytania Street. These were the four distinct but related buildings of our campus. In the centre of the U, between the east and west wings, was a grassy courtyard with old palm trees and a riot of flowers that bloomed all year. Even in the dark, their red bulbs danced with their own fire.

“It’s almost tamed.” She paused. “You live in the convent?”

I nodded, which made me dizzy. A gigantic roach, orange flames reflecting on its slick black armour, skittered under the ambulance.

“Were you inside when it started?”

“No.”

“Where were you?”

“In the alley, smoking.”

“A nun smoking? Alright. See anyone?” she pressed. “Hear anything? Was the door locked?”

Again, I tried to talk but was out of breath.
The investigator’s eyes flickered as she watched the action unfold. “Look at my men. Perfect formation. Finest squad in the state of Louisiana right here.”

I began to cough again. Hacked so hard I threw up.

“Mickey!” The investigator caught the attention of an EMT.

A tall medic in a blue uniform jogged in our direction. “Yo, boss.”

“Need towels for my friend here.”

The medic gently lifted my chin and wiped the vomit from my mouth and neck with a wet towel. “VIP service.”

“Mickey, you’re a gem.”

“We aim to please. Mags, she needs an X-ray.” He pointed to me on the gurney.

“I’ll see to it. Okay, Sister. Keep breathing. Got a classroom in that wing?”

“Classroom? Yeah.” I felt the words leave my mouth, but I couldn’t hear myself.

Like my ears had unplugged from my brain. In my head I recited: *Hail Mary, full of grace.*

“What do you teach?”

“Music.”

“Choir?”

“Guitar, mostly.”

“You sing too? And fly? *Sound of Music* and *The Flying Nun*? Or with that gold grill, you might prefer The Fly Nun?” She chuckled at her own comedy.

I saw trails each time she moved her head. I couldn’t feel my feet. I removed my breathing mask. “Jack’s dead—” I coughed “—and you’re joking?”
“Sorry. Nun jokes should at least be good.” She slid off the ambulance ledge and stood up. “When you see what I see every day, you either laugh or cry. And make perfume. I’m a perfumer. Well, a hobbyist.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Focus.” She seemed confused, like she was talking to herself. “Why were you here on a Sunday night? Were you teaching?”

“No.” I put my hands together to pray but my skin was too hot. The air was like stretchy taffy. “We had our monthly meeting.”

“Isn’t Sunday a holy day?”

“Our work is holy.” I tried breathing in the sweet flow from the oxygen mask again, but I could not stop coughing. Riveaux’s black hat reflected the orange flames. The fumes made me dizzy. As close to being drunk as I had been in years. Part of me held myself there inside the acid, reliving a strangely familiar feeling.

More neighbours walked to the line of ambulances and emergency vehicles. Police ushered them back to the street. “We have a right to know what’s going on,” hollered an elderly man with a tiny white dog. “This is our neighbourhood!”

“Back!” An officer put his hands up.

A cameraman beamed a light onto a reporter holding a microphone.


“Inhale. Exhale.”

“This mask doesn’t work.”
“Okay, Sister.” She signalled to the EMT who’d cleaned up my vomit moments earlier. “Mickey!”

He ran towards us with a big silver emergency kit.

“You’re too wonderful to go away for too long. We need you.” She returned her eyes to me. “He’s my protégé, Mickey. Tell me again what happened after you saw the fire.”

I took a sip of oxygen. “I saw fire in the east wing, through the second-floor window.” I hacked again. “I ran in. Unlocked the door with my key.”

“Students hang out here on weekends?”

I inhaled. “Not usually.”

“Youth is wasted on the young.”

My black blouse, ripped and loose on my shoulder, slipped off, revealing more skin. My beige convent-issue bra. Somehow the black rosary around my neck hadn’t broken. Tattoos extended all the way across my neck, above my jawline, to the base of my skull. Riveaux stared at my Eve tattoo and DEIFIED as I covered my shoulders with the stiff blue blanket the medic had given me. “Prince Dempsey. Look into him.”

“Mmmhmm,” said Riveaux, “who is Prince Dempsey?”

“A troubled student. He started two fires last year.”

“Firebug. Interesting.” She scribbled in her notebook then turned away from me to talk into her radio, terminology I didn’t understand. “Thirty-one. It’s a fiver.” She put her receiver so close to her lips it was practically inside her mouth. She whispered, “Arson. No doubt in my mind.”
Riveaux left to scrutinise the stoop where I’d been sitting moments earlier. She knelt and brought her face close to the cracks in the step. Like she was peering through a keyhole.

Two rats dashed out of the burning wing and vanished into a drain.

Sister Honour was a series of loud sneezes and sobs. “Why, Lord?” Her cheeks sagged as she looked at the burning wing. Cavernous wrinkles surrounded her eyes. I watched hard tears carve her face. “Sister Holiday,” she barked, “what in the good name of our Lord are you staring at?”

I turned and through the smoke and engine lights I noticed Rosemary Flynn striding towards me, arms tightly folded. She held a lace-trimmed handkerchief tightly in her left hand. Rosemary carried herself more ascetically than the Sisters. Ironic, because by her own account she was an atheist. She wore no accessories or ornamentation, except her lipstick, the gasping red of a gored animal. Her strawberry-blonde fringe was severe, like everything else about her, and cut straight across her eyebrows. The rest of her hair was pulled tight on the top of her head in a knot.

Rosemary grimaced at the sight of the police, firefighters on ladders, medics.

“Everyone okay?” Riveaux asked the Sisters and Rosemary who were huddled at the edge of the police tape.

“No,” whispered Rosemary. “We’re in shock.”

Sister Augustine took a breath and said, “We’re okay.”
“No one is okay. Jack is dead!” Sister Honour cried. “And Sister Holiday is staring at me, making a mockery of my grief.”

“What? I was—”

“Ashes to ashes. Bless Jack’s soul, Lord.” Sister Honour cut me off. Her tears were uncontrollable. “Our school almost burned down, in case you hadn’t noticed, Sister Holiday. You left Lamont inside a burning building!”

“Pay her no mind.” Sister Augustine put her hands on mine. “Sister Honour’s just very upset. We all are.”

“I had to help Jamie first. I was trying to help.”

Sister Honour huffed and turned to Bernard Gregory. “The only person Sister Holiday helps is herself.”


“All Sister Holiday gets is breaks!” Sister Honour raged. “She shouldn’t even be here! I see right through her. I see everything.”

Sister Honour was as unforgiving and unwelcome as a Category 5 hurricane during Jazz Fest, but she didn’t pick on everyone. Only me. She turned away from me and talked with Sister Augustine.

“Ignore her.” Bernard smiled at me reassuringly, the way my brother would comfort me after one my regular clashes with our parents.

More firefighters had arrived, and they sprinted towards the fire with crash axes and ladders.
Bernard closed his right fist, kissed it, and shook it at the sky. “Jack? Jack. Can you hear me, buddy?” Tears and snot dripped into his mouth and neatly trimmed black goatee.

Like Rosemary Flynn, Bernard wore his long hair tied in a bun at the top of his head. Whereas Rosemary’s hair was red blonde, Bernard’s was spider black.

Rosemary stepped closer to us. “I’m sorry, Bernard.” She reached out to touch him, patted his shoulder stiffly, then folded her arms. A rivulet of tears rolled out of her right eye. Even her tears were tidy.

Bernard stared at Rosemary then asked, “Why would God let this happen?” He clenched both hands into fists and punched himself in the head.

“No!” Sister Honour flailed her flabby arms. “Don’t you dare blame God. This is the work of human hands.” She looked at me.

“It’s okay.” Sister Augustine held Bernard’s hands, uncurled his fists. “When tragedy strikes, anger is a normal reaction. We must be patient.”

“The trees!” Sister Lourdes shouted. “They’re on fire!”

I looked up. It appeared that our campus palm trees, taller than some apartment buildings in Brooklyn, were smouldering.

“Don’t panic.” I pointed beyond the trees. “The palms are fine.” It was only smoke that had travelled from the east wing that was hovering in the swaying leaves. I wasn’t as easily rattled as Sister Lourdes. As a queer woman, and yes, a Sister of the Sublime Blood, I looked beyond the immediately obvious. Occam was a friar – points for that – but Occam’s Razor was a joke. Answers nested in contradictions. First impressions were usually wrong. Dead wrong.
“Tragedy,” said lanky John Vander Kitt, our bespectacled history teacher. “Sister Holiday, you okay?”

“I think so.” I felt dizzy as I nodded in John’s direction. John smiled, blinked with both of his big, brown eyes. He wobbled, as if he was distracted by the sirens and headlights that cast a menacing orange haze over the canopy of ancient, mossy trees on Prytania Street. Fire is sinister. If it doesn’t reduce a building to ashes it stays alive in the air. What you cannot see is always more haunting.

Investigator Riveaux walked towards us and sat next to me in the open ambulance. “What are y’all teachers doing here so late? I know you had a Sunday meeting but 8p.m. is late.”

“Our committee met from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m.” John spoke loudly, like he had cotton in his ears. “Some of us stayed, to discuss the week ahead. We were in the parking lot when this all started.”

“Mmmhmm.” She scribbled a few words in her notebook and wiped sweat from her chin. “Those students inside” – Riveaux looked at me – “you know them well?”

“Yeah. Good kids.”

“How did they get inside a locked school?”

“How should I know?” As I blinked, the numbing drops seemed to penetrate more of my eye. With the patch, I was still half blind, though.

“What were they doing inside on a Sunday night?”

I put my queer sleuthing skills to work. Two boys alone in a classroom. After hours. Both attractive. Both athletes. Too young to hang out at a bar. Very observant
religious families. Jamie’s hand on Lamont’s shoulder. I pulled off my respirator. “They could have been studying. Hooking up is the more likely scenario.”

Riveaux removed her glasses, rubbed her eyes. “Young love.”

“Check the air-conditioner. See if it was moved,” I said. “That’s how they got in and out of the locked wing.” But Riveaux wasn’t listening.

John stepped out of the ambulance and joined Sisters Honour and Lourdes, who were crying silently, and Sister Augustine, who was on her knees, facing the smouldering east wing, praying. Sister Therese and Rosemary Flynn were comforting the families who had arrived on the scene. Students cried. Their parents were frantic.

A man and woman in plain clothes with NOPD badges clipped to their jackets slowly walked over to us as we sat in the ambulance. They looked me up and down, taking in my torn clothing and tattoos. They nodded hellos. “Riveaux, staying cool?” the woman asked. No handshakes.

“Sergeant Ruby Decker.” She flashed her badge to me. “This good ol’ boy right here is Detective Reginald Grogan.”

He smiled an easy grin and waved a floating piece of ash away from his face.

“Call me Reggie.”

I took a sip of soft air from my respirator then asked: “Is Jamie okay?”

Sergeant Decker cleared her throat. Her eyes were intense. “Bleating like a goat, he bled out like a goat, but he should pull through.”

Detective Grogan took a breath. “We’re Homicide.”

“Finest homicide squad in the state of Louisiana right here,” said Riveaux, an echo of what she had said earlier about Mickey the medic.
I coughed. Homicide. Poor Jack. He was a low-grade creep, but at least he didn’t judge me. Bernard was going to be lost without him.

Smoke billowed grotesquely from the wing, turning air into acid.

“When did you first see the deceased?” Sergeant Decker asked.

“When … deceased?” I couldn’t string words into sentences.

“The body of Jack Corolla.” Decker said, irritated.

Detective Grogan stepped in front of Decker. “We have questions for you, so as soon as you catch your breath, Sister Holiday, we’ll be back. We will want to speak with you about what you saw in there, okay?” He spoke deliberately. “Smart thinking on that tourniquet for Jamie.”

Sister Honour tut-tutted at the compliment. Her cheeks drooped, face frozen in a permanent, predictable scowl, like a cheap carnival mask.

“A few more minutes of smoke would have knocked him out,” Sergeant Decker added.

“Lamont will be fine. Jamie will need surgery and a skin graft.” Detective Grogan put his hands on mine, smiling when he noticed my knuckle tattoos. “They will both pull through, God willing, thanks to you.” Detective Grogan’s thick blonde hair and slow Louisiana drawl gave him an unnerving ease. The homicide squad was in the news every day for one gruesome murder or another. How did Detective Grogan stay tender?

A fifth fire truck with a ladder arrived. Grogan let go of my hands. I wheezed, suffocating in the night air. The deepest caverns of my nostrils itched. Like a memory you can’t erase, an itch inside, an itch you cannot reach, is brutal.
“Someone called 911 and reported the fire,” Detective Grogan said. “The good Samaritan caller didn’t leave a name.” He surveyed the blaze, his eyes swirling with red and orange. “Was it you who called this in, Sister?”

“No.”

Decker jumped in, “But—”

“Easy.” Detective Grogan cracked his knuckles. “Sister needs to rest for a bit.” He looked into my eyes and held my hands again. I took another sip of oxygen. My hands fell from his. “I don’t have a phone. Phone in the convent kitchen. Lay teachers have cell phones. Students too.” Talking made me winded.

“Okay.”

“Prince Dempsey has a phone.”

“Prince,” said Detective Grogan, “quite a royal name.”

“He’s a … student here. He’s behind this.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Obsessed with fire.” I coughed. “Uses his lighter in class. He smokes PRINCE cigarettes, though I don’t know how he affords them. Probably a meth dealer.”

“Same brand as what you were smoking then?”

“I confiscated a pack from him last week. He must have a carton.”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Prince set fires in the boys’ bathroom last year.”

“Was he suspended or expelled for the fires?” asked stocky Sergeant Decker as she scribbled in her notebook.

“Neither.”
“Two fires, and no expelled?” Riveaux was confused.

I was about to tell them about Sister Augustine’s no-expulsion policy, but Grogan cut me off.

“The Sisters of the Sublime Blood are a forgiving Order.” He smoothed the lapels of his sport coat, his eyes on the burning school. “I was a student here, back in the day.” The corners of his mouth lifted and he nodded to Decker.

I tried to ask about Jamie but couldn’t stop coughing.

“Rest those lungs. We will be back to take your statement,” Detective Grogan said.

The homicide team jogged towards the burning building. The firefighters had the blaze all but controlled, though a small flame fanned back to life near the gutter outlining the wing’s right side. The moment was loud and quiet at the same time. The shouting and crying temporarily ceased. Emergency lights spun but no sirens stirred the air. The pressure through the fire hoses was a deep moan that I felt in my chest.

Riveaux fished a cigarette out of a pack from her blouse pocket, eased it into her mouth. “Fire its own beast. Chemical reaction.”

“Sent by the devil.” I tried to cough, but couldn’t get the cough up and out of my throat.

“Made by people, most of the time.”

A voice broke through Riveaux’s radio: “Time to wake Sparky?”

“No,” she said into her handset, turned away from me, and lit her cigarette. “Not for six, seven hours.” She looked at me. “Our arson dog, Sparky, is the best in the state.”
She exhaled and though she had turned away again for privacy, her voice was clear.

“Yeah. Arson.”

An EMT brought a new oxygen mask for me, irrigated my eyes again, and put numbing drops in both. Riveaux called in a new code on her transceiver.

The EMT dashed away. Nothing Riveaux had said to the EMT or to me had registered in real time. The smoke, soot, fumes, adrenaline, and numbing eye drops put a two-second delay on every word. A tall American flag, attached to the back of the fire engine closest to me, rippled in the smoky wind. Police, medics, and firefighters zigzagged in their surreal choreography.

Riveaux turned to me. “You’re damn lucky. Sister what again?”

“Holiday.” I blinked my watery eyes. “I don’t feel lucky.”

“Don’t worry. You’re in good hands.” She tapped her fire department badge. “I’m the first black female fire investigator in New Orleans, so you know I’m fifty times smarter than those white dudes.”

“I’m the first punk nun.”

Investigator Riveaux presented a fresh cigarette to me. “Go ’head. I won’t rat you out, though you should probably catch that breath first.”

“Get that away from me.”

“Suit yourself.” She took a deep drag.

I heard someone laugh. I saw Prince Dempsey flicking his lighter on and off. Next to him was his white pit bull, BonTon, on a heavy chain. Prince was my student and nemesis. Don’t believe people who claim they don’t have an arch-enemy. Everyone does. The irony is that, for many folks, they are their own greatest foe.
“Smells good,” Prince said, then he wordlessly signalled for BonTon to sit. BonTon’s right eye had its lids sewn shut, the eyeball removed. “What’s cookin’? Or should I ask ‘who’s cookin’?’” He pointed to the stretcher and body bag with a lifeless Jack Corolla in it.

The reflection of fire swirled in Sister Honour’s eyes. “Not the time for humour, Mr Dempsey.”

I pulled off my mask and stepped down from the ambulance, falling on my knees after missing a step. “He has a lighter!” I coughed.

Arjune Ruiz snapped pictures – of the fire trucks, the ambulance, me – with his phone.

“Mr Ruiz,” said Sister Augustine, “not now.”

The last licks of flames were being extinguished by the crew. Like anything that breathes, the fire fought hard to stay alive.

“Chill.” Prince smiled. “Sis Holiday’s obsessed with me.”

Sister Augustine helped me up. “Time we take you to the hospital, Sister Holiday.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“We’re bringing you in,” Mickey pressed. “Check your vitals.”

“Check me here. Give me the eye drops. Give me drugs.” I leaned in the direction of Prince, eliciting a growl from one-eyed BonTon. Smoke drifted closer.

Sister Augustine pivoted and faced the ravaged east wing, her thin arms raised high in prayer. “Let us rise from the rubble on the strength of your wings, Lord. Sisters, join me.”
Sisters Therese, Lourdes, and Honour moved closer and then chanted in unison.

“Strengthen us in the power of Your might, O God. Dress us in Your armour so that we can stand firm against the schemes of the Devil.”

_Ephesians_ 6:10–12. I said it every morning.

“Amen,” said Sister Therese, sweet and reliable as a daisy.

“Amen,” said teary Sister Honour.

“Why’s everybody wrecked?” Prince asked.

Sister Honour interjected. “Our brother Jack is dead!”

Prince looked at me. “Accidents happen. You don’t realise how big a fire can get. Right, Sis? Even if you’re playing around with a match, it can get out of control. Fast.”

Prince cleared his throat, gave BonTon’s chain a tug, and spat a thick glob of green phlegm onto the sidewalk.

The fire took another two hours to extinguish, and four hours to ensure there was no live ember ready to spark the inferno back to life. A drone buzzed overhead for the aerial view of the damage. Miles of an orange fire hose, with a circumference larger than Riveaux’s head, lay coiled on the sidewalk, road, and grass.

Once the fire was out, the night air turned more foul. Ashy brown water rained through the second floor of the east wing. Everything was drenched – textbooks, bibles, exams, calendars, all the papers stored for who knows how many decades. Paper floated through windows and doors. Again, I scanned for the scorched cross, thinking I could see it in my peripheral vision. It had vanished, if it was ever there in the first place. Trick of the eye.
Mickey fastened the thin yellow rubber bands of a new oxygen mask over my ears and mouth. “Nice and slow,” Riveaux said. “Breathe normally. Pretend you’re at Sunday Mass.”

Even with a different mask, I couldn’t breathe. I was used to wearing masks. Everyone in New Orleans was. But these were either too loose or too tight. I couldn’t get air in fast enough or deep enough, like I had been punctured inside, and the hole was expanding.
Chapter 5

The next thing I knew it was past midnight and I was alone in an ice-cold shower in the convent bathroom. I stepped out, shivering but still sweating. Too weak to towel-dry my hair. I don’t recall walking home with Investigator Riveaux or Grogan across the street, to the convent. I could hardly stand upright, so who walked me across the street?

For an hour I sat naked on my narrow bed, lungs rattling. Fire engine lights spilled strange shadows on my bare bedroom wall.

Though every ounce of energy had been drained from my limbs, I couldn’t sleep. My throat was raw. The smallest sounds pounded my eardrums. Medics had flushed my left eye twice and given me numbing drops, but it still throbbed with a deep red pain. How did I get into this mess? I was notorious for finding trouble. But even for me, this was outstanding.

I thrashed in my stiff bed until 6 a.m., when it poured. The sky was veined with lightning. I saw Jack’s dead face over and over again as water punched the roof. You think rain will relax but it doesn’t. It gets stronger, heavier, harder. Noah’s Ark rain. Like the invisible magic that governs this city, the rain ties Heaven to Hades. And vice versa. As quickly as the gully washer came, the rain receded. Our rooster, a cranky old bantam named Big Red that lived in Saint Sebastian’s garden, freaked out. He announced himself and the hour, over and over. Damn rooster made himself hoarse. I heard our convent garden cat, Voodoo, yowl. Voodoo and Big Red weren’t friends by any stretch, but they didn’t try to kill or eat each other. Better than most people. Another New Orleans
miracle. My pillow burned the back of my head as I coughed. My sheets felt hard and
sharp as saws. I needed coffee. I could smell that Sister Therese had made a pot of her
chicory root blend. But I was afraid of anything hot.

Seven a.m. Mass. The Sisters of the Sublime Blood attended Mass every morning.
That Monday was no different, except for the fact that my left eye was swollen shut and I
couldn’t stop coughing. Sister Augustine hummed softly, rubbing my shoulders and back
as I coughed. Our priest, Father Reese, gave a dreadfully uninspired homily honouring
Jack Corolla and extolling the graces of forgiveness. The homily was so boring and basic
I was ashamed. I felt a loss for the congregation who hungered for inspiration in the wake
of Jack’s death. The poetry of the Word was what I wanted. The lightning of the light that
sparkled my conversion. Perhaps Father was exhausted. We all were. A slip of a man on
the cusp of turning ninety-years-old, Father Reese had just returned from the Houston leg
of a tour for his most recent book. He was the author of a dozen books on the
evolutionary spirit of the Second Vatican Council – twenty years of his sermons
interspersed with memoir – which were, frankly, narcissistic odes to his own triumphs.
When the fire started, a congregation member drove through the hazy night to bring him
back to New Orleans. I watched Father’s mouth move but all I could hear was the ghostly
scream of the fire alarm.

Usually I loved singing in dark halls, our old rituals, candle smoke, and the
paraphernalia that had been touched by hundreds of hands before mine. So much of
contemporary life is about the newest app or latest gadget, but in church, power is in the
old. The oldest. The first prayers. The first melodies. Ancient choral music. But I could
hardly stand upright. Even the open air of the church felt oppressive.
After the Eucharist, with the wafer unable to dissolve on my dry tongue, I looked at the faces of the saints. Theresa in ecstasy. Mother Mary. Women can save anything or anyone. Except Prince Dempsey. He didn’t want redemption, and if you don’t want to be saved, it won’t stick.

Nine a.m., Monday. Classes were cancelled. Small puddles of rain rippled in the light breeze. The stench of charred linoleum and singed wires and burnt computers and desks made me gag. I needed to review the scene, inch by ashy inch.

Detective Reggie Grogan and Sergeant Ruby Decker stood outside the wounded school, as did Investigator Maggie Riveaux, who barked orders to her team. Riveaux carried nothing except a travel mug, a phone, and a radio clipped to her shoulder. Her voice meandered lazily, like the slow-moving shadows of a Louisiana cypress swamp. A cigarette was tucked behind her left ear. Where was her urgency?

Students, parents, teachers, staff, neighbours, church parishioners, police, the sheriff, and news crews milled about in front of the school.

“Where did Jack die?” asked a student. “He was a creeper.”

“I hate this school,” said another student. “Wish the whole thing burned down.”

“We need CCTV in the school,” a parent declared. “Everyone needs to get fingerprinted!”

Rubberneckers had slowed their cars as they passed the yellow police tape around the battered east wing that, despite the early morning rain, still reeked. Wet char. Burnt paper and wires.
“All classes are cancelled today,” Sister Augustine said into her megaphone as crowds pressed closer. “We will announce on our website when classes will resume. Today we pray. Please stay for the vigil.” She made the sign of the cross and I echoed her movements. Right gloved hand up to my forehead, to my heart, then left to right.

“Was this deliberate?” a parent asked an NOPD officer.

A high-pitched voice shouted from the middle of the crowd: “Tell us what you’re doing to protect our children!”

“New Orleans is cursed.” Another voice piped up.

I watched everyone’s movements from my invisible perch among the Sisters, tracking them, waiting for someone to give something away.

People had left rosaries, incense, flowers, and tall votive candles – a makeshift sidewalk shrine – for Jack. A picture of him looking pissed off – wearing a white flat-brimmed cap that read SLAY ALL DAY, middle finger extended – lay with a flower bouquet and the candles on the pavement. Being out in the heat only for a few minutes had already made the carnations, a cheap bouquet probably bought on the way from Winn-Dixie, shrivel. Poor Jack. We weren’t close. In fact, Jack Corolla irritated me greatly, making snide remarks and cliched jokes about Jesus. But he was just doing this thing, content to come to work and clean up our messes. He never hurt anyone.

Parents and students cried while others took selfies near the yellow police tape.

“In these times of catastrophe,” Sister Augustine told the gathering crowd, looking each person in the eyes, “the Lord gives us the clear path forward. From this fire we will all be reborn.”
“Amen,” someone shouted. I turned and saw it was Bernard, with his hands in prayer position, palm to palm over his heart.

A dragonfly hovered near Jack Corolla’s picture. Its bright wings trapped the sun. It was easy to forget that something so beautiful was also a predator. Every dragonfly has four wings, like it is two in one. A doppelgänger of itself.

“Who did this?” asked Jeremy Fielder, a parent of one of our students, Rebecca. “Is my daughter safe here?”

“We have to trust the police and investigators.” Sister Augustine pointed to Grogan, Decker, and Riveaux, who waved to the crowd. “But most importantly, our faith in Jesus Christ will inspire forgiveness. This is the test.”

“My kid better not get hurt!” another parent screamed.

“Let us pray,” Sister Augustine proclaimed.

“The staff needs to be fingerprinted,” said a mother in a trench coat though it was so hot Bernard face dripped with sweat.

“That’s illegal!” another parent replied. “Completely impossible.”

“Querido Dios,” said Sister Lourdes. “Give us strength, oh Lord.”

Half the crowd prayed. The other half hollered about surveillance and locker searches. Some moms were getting rowdy.

Riveaux, Grogan, and Decker huddled in a circle between me and the police tape.

“We need to take statements from everyone at Saint Sebastian’s – teachers and staff and students,” Detective Grogan told Decker. “Let’s look into this Prince Dempsey. Starting two fires here on the premises.”
“Roger that,” Decker said. “Will be tough to wrangle all …” – she flipped through her notebook – “260 students. Will take a few days.”

“Button it up and deliver, Riveaux.”

“Roger that.”

Grogan chomped on a toothpick that had splintered at the end, like a wishbone.

“Pity, this. Saint Sebastian’s is a rock of the community. I was a student here and an altar boy, before Pappy Grogan moved us to Saint Roch,” he said. “This is a real church. Not that PC lovey dovey Unitarian nonsense. Sister Holiday looks like she is still in rough shape,” he said to Riveaux and Decker, as if I were not standing right in front of them.

“Let’s get her statement,” said Decker.

“Just a few questions. Don’t want to tire her out.”

“Ain’t you sweet,” Decker said to Grogan.

“Sweet as a sledgehammer.” Riveaux laughed.

“Ladies, you’re like two lionesses fighting over me. There’s plenty to go ’round.”

He patted his broad chest and smiled lightly.

“Decker, won’t your wife get jealous?” Riveaux teased.

“Y’all aren’t gay divorced yet?” Grogan asked Decker. “Can I say that? Can’t keep up with what the gays and the transgenders want us to say or not say these days.”

He bent his wet toothpick. Even though it was soggy, it still had enough dry wood to snap.

They talked so freely in front of me, they must have thought I was praying. And I let them think that. I made the sign of the cross again. People view nuns as nameless, a collective noun rather than individuals.
Rosemary Flynn caught my eye. She wasn’t praying. She looked instead at the impromptu memorial for Jack and shook her head disapprovingly. She rearranged the votive candles in a tight row and deadheaded a carnation.

I stood behind her and said “Hello.” My voice must have frightened her because she jerked back.

Rosemary turned around and blinked. “You look terrible.”

“You always say the right thing.”

“Get some rest before you fall over dead.”

Mourning doves cooed somewhere on a tall branch. I looked for them and noticed police officers photographing the scene. They extended the yellow police tape to the alley where I had been smoking when the fire started.

Detective Grogan stepped closer to me. “Feeling better?”

“No.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“We have more questions for you,” said Sergeant Decker, who stood next to Grogan. The bulletproof vest underneath her shirt made the fabric stretch between the buttons.

Grogan put his large right hand on my shoulder. His clothes were impeccable. Crisply starched white shirt, matte black tie, trouser legs creased hard as blades, black shoes polished into mirrors.

“How is Jamie?” I asked.
“Stable,” said Grogan, “but in a critical condition. Bad smoke inhalation. He
needed a blood transfusion, twenty-one stitches, and a graft. He’s lucky you found him so
fast.”

I made the sign of the cross. Hail Mary.

“Where did you first see Jack’s body?” Decker asked, then cleared her throat. Her
large sports sunglasses showed me my phantom image. Bags under my eyes like I was
wearing goth make-up.

“On the B stairwell landing.”

“You didn’t see Jack on the way up?” Decker’s skin was unbroken. No wrinkles
or laugh lines that I could see. Like a fifteen-year-old.

“No. I ran up the A stairs. Other side of the wing."

“Did you see anyone else in the wing at the time? Other students, like this Prince
Dempsey you mentioned?”

“I didn’t see Prince. He’s small and quick, though, so that’s not surprising.”

I had tried to follow that strange shadow in the burning wing, but I didn’t tell the
homicide squad. I couldn’t explain it. It looked – felt – like the Holy Ghost. Meant to be
there. To guide me.

Another NOPD officer approached and muttered something into Grogan’s ear.

“We have to attend to a quick matter. We will have more questions for you tomorrow.
Watch that cough.”

“Don’t go anywhere.” Sergeant Decker pounced.

Rosemary sighed. She had been watching my interaction with the homicide
squad.
“Need something?” I asked Rosemary, after Decker and Grogan walked away.

She pointed to my neckerchief, which had come slightly loose. “You’re exposed.”

I tightened the knot.

Sister Augustine joined me and Rosemary. Besides Rosemary’s red lipstick, the women looked alike, could even be mother and daughter. Both tall and pale, both convinced that the “old ways” were superior. From long division to cursive writing. Where they diverged was in their life callings: Rosemary into science, Sister Augustine into the church.

“Sister Augustine,” whispered Rosemary, “why did this happen to us?” Her grey eyes were buttoned tight and high on her head. Her mouth was heart shaped.

“God works in mysterious ways,” Sister Augustine explained. She gave Rosemary another hug. “We must be strong. For the community. For the city. Be the light.”

“This city is cursed,” said Bernard, who wore a Ramones T-shirt underneath his custodian uniform. He hugged me, and his long arms practically wrapped around me twice. Rosemary tilted her head at the sight of his embrace, then walked away.

Bernard’s body heat was too much. I tried to wriggle out of his hug but he wouldn’t let go. His neck smelled of freshly cut grass and gin – not a good sign for a Monday morning.

“I can’t breathe,” I said.

“Sorry.” He loosened his arms and ran to light one of the shrine candles that had been extinguished in a gust of wind.

Sister Honour returned. “Look at them.” She pointed to the dozens of neighbours and parents of Saint Sebastian’s students who were pacing around the yellow police tape,
taking pictures, and crying. “Vultures. We never see them at Sunday Mass. They never support our bread sales. And then a fire breaks out, Jack perishes, and we can’t keep them away from the cameras.” She glowered at me. “Some people live for attention.”

Sister Augustine extended her hands to Sister Honour. “I know you’re shaken, but when our flock returns to church, they will have questions. It will be you and me and our Sisters and the life-giving love of Jesus Christ that will comfort them.”

Sister Honour’s eyes flashed. “Yes. Bringing our neighbours – our city – back to the Word.”

“Thank you for keeping our spirits high.” Sister Therese joined in in her sweet, luminous way, like a sunbeam piercing a knot of dark-bellied clouds.

“It is the Lord who keeps our spirits high.”

“You even smell reborn, Sister Augustine, like new trees, new leaves, and calendula,” Sister Therese said.

Sister Augustine smiled and hugged Sister Therese tightly, with her eyes closed. “All of your work in our garden and in the prison has given you wisdom. You are an example for us all.”

Bernard Gregory chuffed as he returned to the group. “The police want to friggin’ question me about the fire. Jack was my homeboy. I’d have put myself on the tracks for that dude.”

“They have to question everyone at the school,” said Sister Honour, “not only you. You’re not special.”
I said to Bernard, “Prince loves looking tough. With his pit bull and fake gold chains. Always trying to show the teachers he’s in charge. What if he set the fire as a threat?”

“Nah. Threats ain’t his style. If he wanted to hurt y’all, he’d just do it.”

“Well, we need to keep eyes on everyone, but especially on him. We need evidence.”

“Sure thing, Sister.”

“I started one or two fires in my day,” I whispered.

“I set some fires, too,” he replied. “Not to hurt anybody, though. To see how it works. No two fires move the same way, no matter how you try to control them.”

From my bedroom window Monday night, I stared at the east wing of the school. The sky was stitched with menacing clouds. A storm stirred over the Mississippi. I watched rubberneckers and police officers milling, yellow tape vibrating in the wind. Less than twenty-four hours since the fire had finally been extinguished, my school was an active crime scene.

“Arson,” Investigator Riveaux had whispered into her radio during the fire as I sat struggling for air in the ambulance.

My eyes stung and my chest was sore, but I needed to search for clues. I was still weak, so I walked slowly around the school, church, and convent. Three police cars idled outside of the east wing. Each car held two officers, and their bodies were so still it was as if they were sleeping. Suddenly a black hat turned towards me. It was Sergeant
Decker. I kept walking. Every step I took felt echoed, as if I was being trailed and mirrored on screens somewhere out of sight. Two, three, four of me.

The air around the damaged wing reeked of bitter ash, wet wood, and plaster. Burnt papers, cracked drywall. There was so much to see, I wasn’t sure where to look. Wood trim from ruined doorways and metal shards littered the ground. The makeshift shrine for Jack had gathered more votives. Some tall and coloured, some short and white. Their flames flickered and spat in the sudden wind.

The church bell chimed six times. Six p.m. I stood in the doorway of the church and saw Roy, our resident homeless man, sleeping on the street. Bernard Gregory brought him a cup of water from the teachers’ lounge. He set it near Roy’s leg and walked away without waking him up.

My forehead was slick with sweat. I watched Bernard walk to the utility shed adjacent to the school, retrieve the ancient lawnmower, and crouch down as he filled it with gas. Bernard was a weirdo – part of why I liked him – but even for him, mowing the lawn at 6 p.m. was odd. It was still light out, but why bother. The incessant police cars, ambulances, and engines shredded the grass.

Bernard looked up and saw me. “Hey!” He waved. “Sister!”

Too weak to yell across the street, I signalled to him. He ran to me.

“Heya!”

“Why are you working?” My voice felt gritty. The church bells rang.

“What else am I gonna do? Need to stay busy.” His eyes darted around as three people walked into church behind us. “I need to talk to you after Mass.”

“Sure.”
He nodded and sprinted across the street, back to the shed. Bernard was never still, always wrestling an old piece of equipment or that damn lawnmower. Everything at Saint Sebastian’s was falling apart, at the end of its useful life.

Evening Mass calmed me. Mass was always lightly attended, with whole sections of the church unoccupied. Churches were shedding parishioners by the day and Saint Sebastian’s was no exception. But, that night, a dozen people attended and prayed, joining me, my three Sisters, and Father Reese, who had, despite his distinguished age, a booming, baritone voice like an old radio DJ. My weak reflection in the stained glass, the first Station of the Cross, shadowed me as I gripped the back of each wooden pew on the walk to communion.

As I dipped my hands in cold holy water afterwards, I tripped on my own feet. Almost cracked my head against the marble basin.

“You’re alright,” said Sister Lourdes as she helped me up, “but we’re going to need a trim before Jack’s funeral.” She put her warm hand on the back of my head and smoothed my hair. Sister Lourdes was a creative virtuoso, painting wild murals with her art students. Her creativity astounded me, and she was grateful to God for the opportunity to make art every day. She also had a steady hand with scissors, and she cut my hair in Saint Sebastian’s garden as Voodoo wrapped his thin black tail around my ankle. With only one mirror in the convent, in the foyer, I was always surprised by how long my hair had grown.

Sister Lourdes caught me a second time as my legs gave out. “It’s okay.” Her voice was gentle but by the way she looked at me, it was clear she was worried. “Should we see if Nurse Connors can pay us a visit and fix you up?”
“I’ll be fine. Nobody can fix me.”

“Except God,” she said.

Ten minutes after Mass ended, I heard a loud “Hey!” It was Bernard, standing at the church door. “Got a second?”

“Tell me good news.”

“I found something in the trash this morning. A black blouse with a burnt sleeve.”

“What?”

“A black blouse with a burnt sleeve,” he repeated. “Technically it’s a melted sleeve. It’s like a slate tile, it’s so hard, like plastic that has remoulded.”

“You think it has to do with our fire?”

“It has to be connected. Classes were cancelled but I needed to work. Keeps my mind from spinning.”

“Tell Investigator Riveaux and Detective Dickbag about this. Get your phone. Why didn’t you tell anyone sooner?”

“I found it in the trash in your music room.”

“My room?”

“I thought it was your shirt, so I was trying to protect you.”

“I didn’t do this.”

“But it’s a nun’s blouse. Exactly like the one you’re wearing right now.”

“Dear Lord. All the Sisters have five identical black blouses. Anyone can buy one at the Guild downtown.”

“Maybe someone is trying to frame you. I saw Prince today too. He was swaggering outside. I think he got into the east wing somehow, past the billion cops.”
“Bastard. I’ll ask each Sister if any of them is missing a blouse. I need to find Sister Augustine.”

I ambled out into the street to find Sister Augustine, but she was in the middle of a prayer, arms up to the sky, leading a vigil at the sidewalk shrine. A searing wind blasted side to side, then up and down, like it couldn’t make up its mind.

Too tired to stand and wait for Sister Augustine to finish, I shuffled back to the convent. I’d have to tell her first thing in the morning. In my room, I counted only three blouses. Four in total, including the one I was wearing. Someone took one of my blouses, burned it, and put it in my trash for the cops to find. Whoever started the fire was trying to set me up. But they made a critical error. By underestimating me, they showed their hand. They were arrogant. Almost as arrogant as me. Who besides Prince would get so far up their own ass, jump so far ahead of themselves?
Tuesday morning, Sister Augustine was at the sidewalk shrine again. Praying, eyes closed. I prayed with her for a moment. *Our Father, who art in heaven.* A police car drove past us slowly.

Sister Augustine opened her eyes in prayer, and I pounced. “You’ll never guess what Bernard Gregory found.”

“A time machine to turn back the hands of time?” She hugged me and sighed.

“I wish. He found a nun’s black blouse in the trash in my music room, with a burnt sleeve. We think it’s connected to the arson.”

“My child, this is shocking.”

“I know, but I—”

“Did you,” she tilted her head and narrowed her eyes without losing the ease in her face, “have something to do with the fire? If you need to confess, I am here for you.”

“No! Fuck no. Sorry.” I wiped sticky sweat from my eyebrows.

“Did you tell the police about the blouse?”

“Not yet. Bernard has the shirt.”

“Well, we must tell the police immediately. No time to waste.”

She assisted me to the utility shed, where I was sure we would see Bernard, but he was nowhere to be found.

“Let’s find Riveaux.”
It felt good to dash away with such purpose with Sister Augustine. We were practically arm in arm looking for Riveaux, but we couldn’t find her. Growing up queer – ‘tolerated’ by my parents, forever worried about riling them up, getting tossed out of the apartment – made me crave a family of my own, a community of my own design. I appreciated being a Sister, belonging to the family of our Order. It was a pain in the ass, for sure. Biting my tongue with Sister Honour. The deluge of snide remarks during my first week of teaching, three years ago. But the weeks rolled on. With my black gloves and scarf – my generic black uniform – and new name, I became just another nun. Invisibility was my disguise.

The sky was a vibrant mottle of blue and while, like mosaic tiles, threaded with the vibrations of birdsong. Green parrots, robins, and grey mourning doves chirped their secret codes. Two white clouds floated, perfectly still, like two giant eyes, silently watching.

The school’s east and west wings were far enough apart for the police and fire department to give the safety clearance for classes to resume, but in the west wing only.

I was still a bruised mess. Cheeks scraped. A bloodshot eye. But, like Bernard, I could not sit around all day. It would have done my head in. I could crack this case wide open if I had access to all the reports and information. The cops were a joke. There were clues to find, corners to search. Why was I the only one working the scene?

Sister Lourdes met me at the door to my room – “Hola, Sister Holiday” – and walked with me across the street to school. The fire doors had kept the smoke and fumes contained, but inside the west wing, the foul fumes of burnt computers and melted plastic ripped the back of my throat.
Without the use of east wing classrooms, Saint Sebastian’s teachers doubled up and combined students in shared classrooms. Despite our protests, Sister Honour, head of the Classroom Committee for Christian Values, responsible for upholding traditional decorum, declared that Rosemary and I had to share a room. My music room was the largest space left and the easiest area to reconfigure because it had movable chairs and tables rather. Only my desk, at the front of the music room, was immovable. The heavy wood monstrosity also doubled as my office. Every hardboiled PI, even Mike Hammer, that dick, has an office. That’s where I kept my notes on the arson case, my list of suspects – Prince, the prime suspect, though I imagined adding to it in short order – and a list of clues.

I hugged my guitar and felt eyes on me everywhere I turned. Students and cops watched my movements as they walked past my classroom. Or, was it the itchy heat of the blaze that I couldn’t shed? Phantom fires hovered like wasps near my earlobes. My guitar pick, my lucky charm, smouldered in my back pocket.

My students took turns practising solos while, at the other end of the classroom, underneath a giant crucifix on the wall, stood Rosemary Flynn. She over-enunciated every “t” in her monotonous lecture on fluid friction.

“Lamont had a sprained ankle,” a student whispered excitedly.

“Sister Holiday left him to die in the fire,” another student shouted. “Bitch.”

Sister Augustine’s strong voice piped in through the PA system. “Dear students, your classmate, Lamont, is healing, praise the Lord. He will be out of school for an unknown amount of time on sick leave. We will pray for him, Jamie, and Jack Corolla, every day.”
Prince Dempsey raised his hand. I ignored him. He set it down and raised it again, clearing his throat. “What’s the most painful way to die?” he asked with a smile. BonTon sat curled up next to his desk. Her collar was a large-gauge hardware store chain that Prince had probably stolen.

“Excuse me?”

He smiled. “I asked you ‘what’s the most painful way to die?’ Burning to death or getting stabbed?” Prince’s eyes, the blue of a propane flame, were fixed on me. He flicked a piece of scab into the middle of the room.

“Ewww,” groaned thirteen students in unison. “He’s throwing his scabs at us. Sick!”

Prince held his lighter up again and burned a piece of scab that he had ripped from his arm.

“Put the lighter away.” I played a C chord, letting the vibration breathe. “What’s the most painful way to die?” I repeated Prince’s question. “Being your music teacher.”

Students laughed. BonTon lifted her bubblegum-pink nose towards Prince and sniffed the air. Then she returned to forming a white spiral on the floor. I hugged my guitar again. I missed my electric. The instant lightning of it. The high. It was so bad, my pining, my first year in the convent, that I contemplated leaving altogether. But my Yamaha acoustic was the more huggable instrument. I just wished it could hug me back.

Rosemary stood tall on her side of the classroom. She was statuesque – as certain as a commandment. She was either so deeply engaged with her lecture that she didn’t hear the kerfuffle in my corner, or she was pretending not to notice.
I slid my guitar pick from the pocket of my black trousers. In my old life I wore all black. As a nun I wear all black. No big change there.

Prince Dempsey: greasy blonde hair, smug smile on his scarred face. The loud-mouth who never did his homework, who tormented the school’s gay students, picked at the scab on his left forearm and flung another piece of it into the air. Yes, Prince Dempsey changed my life.

When he was transferred into my third-period music class last term, I realised that the Devil was alive, as real as a swamp rat. His one-eyed bruiser followed him everywhere. BonTon was sanctioned by Sister Augustine as a service dog for Prince’s PTSD and type 1 diabetes. BonTon was trained to detect low or high blood sugar by smelling Prince’s saliva.

My fingers needed to move, so I leaned over my guitar and fingerpicked two chords. Playing the guitar was another vessel for prayer – a conduit for God’s love. With the guitar tucked into my body, my fingers became my brain. Playing let me jump out of myself, into timelessness. I have terrible dexterity, except when it comes to sex, fighting, playing the guitar, and praying. I’m single-minded that way. Diving into music, helping others learn how to play an instrument, was one of the gifts I could give.

As I played on, I felt Prince’s penetrating stare. What a great time for Lucifer to claim what’s rightfully his, drag Prince back to Hell. Yes, a queer Catholic Sister devoted to Jesus Christ and who harboured venomous thoughts about a student.
The only difference between me and any other professional in America is that it’s not about me. I’m thinking of the greater good. Only the greater good.
Chapter 7

Rosemary took her class on a field trip to the planetarium late Tuesday afternoon. I was relieved. I needed my room for me and my students again, if only for an hour. The police pulled students out into the hall and into Sister Augustine’s office for interviews every hour. Parents sat in idling cars outside school, paranoid, air-conditioners powered at full blast.

Through the glass of my classroom door I saw movement. Then heard a knock. BonTon barked.

“Shh, Bonnie.” Prince calmed her. “It’s okay, baby.”

As I was about to open the door, I saw Sergeant Decker. Detective Grogan stood behind her.

“Have a minute?” Sergeant Decker flipped her spiral-bound notebook open.

“Sure. I’m just hanging out in the green room with all my adoring fans. No, I don’t have a minute.”

“Touchy.” Decker scoffed.

“I’m teaching a class, as you can clearly see.”

Detective Grogan ran his hands through his mop of blonde hair.

Decker cracked her gum. She was as short as she was stout. Plain except for the long braids held together at the base of her skull with thin purple, gold, and green beads, the colours of carnivale. “We need more details about the east wing.”

“Now? Here?”

“Now,” answered Decker. “Unless you’d prefer to come downtown?”

“Cool it, Mr Ruiz. Five minutes, folks. Try not to blow anything up. Rebecca and Fleur, watch Arjune. If anyone pulls out a phone, tell me.”

The girls nodded.

“Amen.”

Rebecca and Fleur were my top girls. Boys could never be trusted.

I readjusted my scarf, pulled my gloves on tight. I stepped out into the hallway with the homicide squad. “Okay, what?”

“When you carried Jamie down the steps, did you hear anything?”

“The fire alarm. Lamont crying his head off. Besides that, nothing.”

“You didn’t see anything near the body of Jack Corolla?”

“His ladder.”

“Was it folded or unfolded?”

“You’re the detectives. Look at the crime scene photos. Or show me.”

“Feisty, this one.” Sergeant Decker shook her head. “Work with us. Folded or unfolded?”

“Unfolded. On its side. Like he was up at the top and had fallen off. Maybe he was trying to fix the sprinkler. None of the sprinklers were working.”

“We are aware. We were there too. What else was near him? Did you see a phone? Wallet?”

“His toolbox.”

“Anything else?”

“Think,” said Grogan.
“I don’t have time for this.”

“Did you see the other janitor, er, Bern—”

“Bernard?”

“Yes, him.”

“I didn’t see Bernard. Besides Jack in the stairwell and Lamont on the second floor, it was empty.”


“Hard to imagine leaving Lamont up on the burning floor.” Sergeant Decker whistled. “Tough call. I know you’re a small lady – me too – but I would have brought both students out.”

“My job’s harder than yours.”

She leaned closer to me. “Ever been shot in the face?” She pointed to her chin. Pink scar, jagged as broken teeth.

“Not yet.”

“I have.”

“Might want to consider plumbing,” I said. “Good benefits and no danger of getting shot.”

“That’s all for now,” Grogan remarked. “Needed to clear those items up.”

“You’re wasting your time.” I leaned closer to Grogan. “Prince Dempsey is the suspect you should be looking at.” I pulled my black gloves on tighter and pointed behind me, inside the classroom. “He has a rap sheet. He’s set two fires already. He had opportunity.”
“What’s the motive?”

“He’s a bully and he wants control.” My queer paranoia has trained me to look in unexpected places, including the centre of attention. “This is an inside job. Prince is unhinged. It fits.”

Decker smiled at Grogan. “Convincing, this one,” she said. “Sign up for the next Citizens’ Police Academy.”

“Maybe I will. I’ll solve cases faster than you two. No offense.” I made the sign of the cross.

Grogan stepped in front of Decker, placed his hand on my shoulder again. My old man was a cop and he never touched a civilian unless he had his knee in their back during an unruly arrest. For such a big guy, Grogan’s hand was light. “Thank you, Sister, for caring and for sharing your ideas. Don’t worry. We’re working on this from every angle.”

Decker looked at her notebook again. I read a list of names upside down: Bernard Gregory, John Vander Kitt, Rosemary Flynn, Father Reese, the Sublime Sisters, Prince Dempsey. Decker caught me looking and abruptly closed her book. The duo turned and walked down the hall.

“Rebecca, tempo,” I said after I returned to class. I was flustered, but with the guitar in my hand I regained focus quickly. I demonstrated how to hold the guitar neck without crowding the strings. I wanted to shut my brain off and let my hands move. My body was its happiest when playing. I didn’t hide behind my instrument, but I was my most myself when I was either playing or praying. Even with scumbags like Prince Dempsey in the mix, it never felt like a waste of time to teach music. I wanted my students to learn techniques well enough they could start to hear their own musical voice.
To let their hands and bodies take over during a performance. Playing guitar – whether it was a practice or nailing a lick or just messing around – was the best way to blow off steam.

But instead of mirroring my movements, the students stared at my hands. My knuckle tattoos were hard to read as my fingers moved, but the kids already knew what they spelled. LOST (left hand). SOUL (right hand). They still stared.

My untamed hair and tattoos flagged me as more of a student than a teacher. I never belonged anywhere, but Saint Sebastian’s was different. I didn’t wear a traditional nun’s wimple, like Sisters Augustine and Honour, but around my neck hung the rosary with my large obsidian crucifix. Like God, like the skeleton under my tattooed skin, my crucifix moved as I moved, such a part of me that I often forgot it was there.

But one tattoo felt so alive it was impossible to forget. It was the matching tatt shared by me and my brother, Gabe. Growing up in Brooklyn, everyone mistook us for fraternal twins. We called each by the same nickname (Moose). We read the same books as kids (Nancy Drew, Sherlock Holmes), worked on the same puzzles, played the same detective boardgame (Clue). We had our own language. Our eighteen-month difference (me, the eldest) didn’t present an obstacle. I was in my own head (a narcissist, according to Moose) a lot of the time, so there was no bitter rivalry. We looked alike even though my hair was coal black – a bitch to dye blonde – and his was chestnut. Our eyes were our one identical feature. Clear blue eyes with heavy lids that made us look stoned all the time.

I was protective of my bro. He was constantly bullied after coming out in his freshman year of high school. When I was seventeen and he was sixteen, Moose was
viciously attacked in the locker room by three members of the football team. He needed four stitches in his head, and more in other places. He was on the track team, but he shared the same locker room as the football Neanderthals. After they all punched him and kicked him in the face and head, they blocked the doors, and three of them raped him. I had never heard of such a thing. I didn’t realise boys could be raped. How naïve I was back then. Pathetic. I pledged to never take men’s insatiable appetite for control for granted. Nothing would slip by me again.

Mom and I were in the hospital with Moose for two days after the attack. Pop came in the mornings before his shift.

I remember the feeling of Moose’s wavy chestnut hair as I pet his head. “Tell me who did it.”


Moose’s eyes closed, his long eyelashes casting shadows on his sunken, scarred face. Sixteen years old and already ruined.

“They will pay for this,” I said, ignoring Mom.

The wheels of his bed squeaked as Moose turned away from me.

“There are fifteen dudes on that team. Say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ as I list them all so we can identify the three.”

“Holiday, drop it!” Pop walked into the room so quietly I didn’t realise he was there. “Gabriel is not going to press charges.”

“The school won’t act unless Moosie names names. He’s terrified. We have to help him!”

“Listen to your father.” Mom couldn’t look at me.
“Mom. Gabriel’s jaw is shattered. Those fuckers are going to pay.”

“Only God can judge the sinful.”

“God needs my help getting these animals to trial.”

“Drop it, Moose.” Gabe cried into his pillow. “It won’t do anything.”

Mom shook her head. “They are savages, but only God can judge. Forgive them, Holiday. They were probably all assaulted themselves. Only the broken can break others. Only the damaged can damage. Focus on your brother. Don’t make this about you. Not everything is about you.” As she leaned over to touch Moose’s shoulder, tears rolled down her face, dripping from the hook of her long nose.

Pop told us not to press charges for Moose’s attack. I carried out my own investigation anyway. I asked around at school if anyone knew anything. Of course everyone knew, but no one would talk. I signed up for track and field trials, learned sports schedules, and shadowed all fifteen team members. I played dumb. I played straight. I ingratiated myself. I did whatever it took to cosy up and identify the rapists. Over the course of three weeks, I made out with four of the team members to try to coax out information. The losers didn’t put two and two together that I was Moose’s sister, but my plan wasn’t working. I sucked one guy off in his apartment after a game. I had numbed my gums and lips with coke, but I still had to disguise my disgust. At a house party in Greenpoint, I spiked the drinks of four others with grain alcohol to get them head-spinningly drunk. Booze isn’t a truth serum, but I wanted to lower their inhibitions. Finally, it worked. Todd Harrison, so wasted he couldn’t open his eyes, confessed.

“Yeah, sooo whattttt? I did it.” He slurred into my phone recorder. “Fags – they all want it. They all wanna get drilled. Imma do it again too. I did ‘em a favour. Was bound to
happen at sooner or later. At least we’re all hung. You wanna see?” He named two others boys, and started to unzip his fly before he passed out. I left Todd at the house party, hog-tied with his belt and tie, laying face-down in his own vomit. I spray-painted RA PISTS on the lockers of the three attackers. Trailing the team was easy. Hunting them was fun. Tricking them was delicious. That’s when it all started. When I first knew sleuthing was another gift I could offer to God. Deliver justice in a broken world. If even for a fleeting moment.

I emailed the recording of Todd’s drunk confession to my father, but he said a coerced confession would never be admissible in court.

“For the last time, Holly, think of the family.” He shook his head. “Think of me. Think of Gabriel, with his behaviour. Sounds like he made the first move. An unwanted advance? You know how men are. Gabriel should have known better.”

“You’re not saying Moose deserved this?”

“Move on. Drop it. I’m too close to it. They’ll think I’m corrupt, kiddo. I’m sorry. We’re going to take care of Gabriel. Trust me. I will make this right.” Dad hugged me, his cheek soft against my forehead. Brooklyn cops were harder than the steaks my Mom regularly cremated, and Pop had a reputation to uphold.

Moose was too afraid to return to school after the attack. We started skipping classes together. He disassociated at the first sign of discord. He lost his light. I thought it would cheer him up to get a tattoo together. We decided on The Tree of Life. A reminder of our roots, for better or worse, how he and I would always be connected. Knotted together by what we could see and not see. My tree covered most of my back. I wanted it to be big and bold – loud enough to block out the sun, casting its own strange light in this
scary world. Moose’s tree was smaller. He said he wanted to leave room for it to grow. He waited in the lobby as I lay on my stomach on the tattoo artist’s table. My bones vibrated with the hum of Aimee’s ink gun. She sang during the four-hour tattoo process. I liked the way her breath settled on my neck as she worked. Her iron grip on my shoulder kept my body perfectly still as her needle etched roots, branches, impossibly subtle veins of bark. Trees were one of God’s many miracles. Meridians of energy, life, shade, protection. But no one would see my tattoo anymore. Except a doctor, if I ever went for a check-up. My Tree of Life would stay concealed, like every other tattoo, under my generic black nun’s uniform. One self buried under a new one.

Prince’s laughter startled me from my daydream. He picked off more of his scab and stared out the window.

“Mr Dempsey, there are no answers to life’s pressing mysteries through the window. Eyes onto page two, if you can manage it.”

“Suck my dick, if you can manage it.”

He continued to gaze outside. I wanted to kick Prince out of his chair and pin him down by the throat like a fox. Instead, I used my foot to slide his guitar case behind his chair, outside of the semicircle, into the aisle. Behind Prince, with BonTon still snoozing, I opened the case, hoping to search it. I needed to find proof that could tie Prince to the fire. I ran my hands along the satin pockets of the case. Nothing. I searched for a false bottom. I shook his guitar and listened for a hidden treasure. For a moment I worried a student would turn around and ask what I was doing. But, as usual, they were so self-absorbed it could have rained grasshoppers and they wouldn’t have noticed. I looked inside the instrument’s hull. Inside the cavity was a tiny plastic bag of beautiful blue-grey
marijuana buds. I slid it out between the guitar strings and pocketed it. Bernard would appreciate it.

A man with a familiar face approached the classroom door. “Sister Holiday,” he said flatly, “we’re taking Patrick out of school.” It was Jason Curtis, the father of one of my students.

Patrick Curtis, seated next to Fleur Shott, began gathering his instrument and books.

“Mr Curtis, you should talk with Sister Augustine first.”

“No.” He wiped sweat away from his thinning hairline. “We are transferring him to Saint Ann’s. He’s not safe here. Patrick, chop chop!”

“Please check in with Sister Augustine.” Neither Patrick nor Jason Curtis responded as they walked away.

“This place is falling apart.” Prince laughed loudly, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and rested his gigantic feet on his guitar case, which I had placed back in front of him without him or anyone noticing. Invisible.

“Holy Mary,” I said under my breath, because if there ever was a boss, it was absolutely the Mother of God. I loved Mary as my own mother. I spoke to her every day. 

_Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen._

Like a finger reading Braille, I ran my tongue over the gold cap on my left canine. It was a secret conversation between my old and new lives, like the black roots that reached through my white hair, which Sister Augustine allowed me to dye with the convent’s jumbo bottle of peroxide. I persisted until she relented. Yep, I wore her down. The same way I would wear Prince down. A nun and a sleuth have more in common than you’d
guess. We both wear black. We hide in plain sight. And, go ahead and try, but you cannot wear us out. We’re as patient and stubborn as a virus.

“Damn!” Arjune yelped as he dropped his phone. He must have been taking pictures or texting. He was also snapping photos the night of the fire. Maybe Prince had been caught in the act.

“Phone, please.” I extended my gloved hand and he placed his smartphone on my palm. “Thank you. I will return it after class.” I put it in the back pocket of my black trousers, then played three chords. I floated my left hand up and down the neck of the guitar.

“Pardon me for another moment. I see Detective Grogan again.” Except that I didn’t see Grogan. I slipped into the empty hallway with Arjune’s phone. How light and bright it was. I missed having a phone – the cure for boredom. I searched what looked like it could be a photo app. There were dozens of images of blunts and kids playing videogames, some pictures of me from Sunday night in the ambulance (looking wretched), and pictures of the burning school. None of Prince. I heard the students wilding out, turned off Arjune’s phone, and ducked inside.

BonTon stood and stretched her muscled body.

“Ow!” Rebecca yelped.

“What now?”

“Prince Dempsey pulled out one of my hairs.” The room smelled sour, of sudden fire. “Owwww!” she squealed. “He lit my hair on fire!”

“Mr Dempsey.” I closed my eyes, “Did you pull one of Rebecca’s hairs from her head and set it on fire?”
“Crazy bitch,” he said. “She’s making it up.”

“He does it every week, ever since he lit the bathroom on fire.”

“Where’s the proof?” Prince smiled, held his hands up high. His lighter was on the desk. “No proof, no crime.”

“Rebecca, accept my apology for this harassment.” I turned to face Prince.

“Watch it.”

Looking out the window, Prince said through a yawn, “I’m going to burn this shithole to the fucking ground. I’ll finish the job next time.”

“If only the detectives were still here so you could tell them in person.”

“Invite them back.”

“Give Prince the room to learn and make mistakes, to grow,” Sister Augustine told me after he set the bathroom fires months ago. “Prince and his mother spent twenty-four hours trapped on the roof of their apartment after Katrina.”

“As did many other people.” I readjusted my neckerchief. “Prince is dangerous. He’s going to hurt someone.”

Sister Augustine perked up. “Being tough is easy. Compassion is hard.” Our principal always rebuked me with a smile. “Be patient. Think of the bigger picture. Every Sister has a vital role to play in delivering the Word, and you might have the most important contribution of all, Sister Holiday.”

Prince’s voice wrenched me back into the moment. “I said I’m gonna burn this shithole to the tar.”

_Hail Mary. Grant me the strength to forgive, to understand._ I squeezed the wingtips of my shoulders together.
“You’ll burn in hell. And you.” Prince pointed to the students. “You too.”

Prince gestured to each student in the semicircle. “And fagboy right there. He gonna burn.” Prince pointed to Ryan Brown, who was rummaging anxiously in his blue backpack. It looked like Ryan was hiding a nip of whisky. How did he get his paws on booze? He was only sixteen and a quiet, gentle student.

I closed my eyes, cleared my throat, and said to Prince, “Get your ‘comfort dog’. You have detention. Get the fuck out – now.” At the word “fuck,” regret like static shock curled my toes. I was too late to send Prince to detention because the class bell rang before I could write out the infraction form. One long mechanical bleat of the bell. Students packed up their instruments and turned their phones on. The exodus began.

“Sorry, Sis.” Prince smiled, slid the unlit cigarette into his mouth. BonTon stood close and steady at his side, like the sidecar to his Harley. “Until next time.”
Chapter 8

I wanted to search the campus again Tuesday night, but after school I had to walk to the CBD to join Sister Therese for a shift at the jail. I took a fresh pair of gloves for my journey across town. It was the hottest time of the day. Hottest hour of the day. Atomic sun, gauzy walls of heat. They say if you can make it in New York you can make it anywhere. But New Orleans is the crucible. The home of miracles and curses – neither life nor death but both. Tropical purgatory. *Give me the fire*, Saint Augustine cried. Sweat rained down my back as I walked to the jail. Past Johnny’s Po-Boy Hut. Past a rat carcass foaming with maggots. Past the old vaudeville theatre. Paint on the front door peeled off in big grey rolls as demonic jazz ghosted through the windows. So many of our grand spaces half dead, ravaged by storms and floods. Broken but still lush. The lushes. Dirty, dripping opulence. Even the puppets are raunchy here – burlesque and velvet. Mummified cats, bags of bones glow inside false walls. If it’s not grotesque, don’t bother. Skeletons. Monsters. Secrets don’t need to hide in the closets of New Orleans. They dance down Magazine Street in debaucherous parades. Haunted elegance. All the sinners down on their knees, throwing up or praying to be reborn. Like me. At least I had a plan. Actually, it was God with the plan. Find the arsonist, stop the killings. I was his weapon. His sleuth. My finger on his trigger. For once I could tip the balance. Sister Holiday, God’s mercenary in this broken town where the air was as thick as the vice grip of a gin hangover. Not that I’ve been hungover much as a Novice of the Sublime Blood. But some fevers the body doesn’t want to forget, no matter how hard you try. No matter how much you sweat.
Outside, in the afternoon sauna, I noticed Prince and BonTon strolling in front of the school. The three police cars that had been parked there all day were nowhere in sight. Maybe they were needed elsewhere. Law enforcement was stretched thin due to budget cuts. Prince and BonTon circled Jack’s candle shrine in front of the school. Prince had his back to me and must have thought he was alone, or he didn’t care, as he stood directly over a votive candle. One hand held BonTon’s chain, the other hand was in front of him, near his crotch. While I couldn’t be sure, it looked like the fucker was pissing on the shrine. Two candles went out. Something splashed. A police car returned and Prince and BonTon walked away. I said nothing as I recorded the details in my mind. I needed a camera. I had to catch Prince in the act. With hard evidence, I could nail him.

He’d said it: “finish the job.”

Heat dripped from the purple crevasse of crepe myrtle and jasmine’s opal petal teeth. A black butterfly zigzagged through the steam. After walking three miles in the heavy, humid heat, I was grateful to see Sister Therese holding a large glass of water at the door to the jail. She smiled when she saw me. Her massive overbite gave her a cartoonish quality, like a grandmother rabbit. I drank the water quickly and loudly, water missing my mouth, rolling down from my cheeks and chin into my soggy scarf. Sweat pooled at the small of my back, the roots of my Tree of Life.

On the medical floor of the jail, in a room no bigger than my music room at Saint Sebastian’s, Sister Therese had created the Prison Birth Centre. It was a functional, albeit modest, pre- and post-delivery centre for female inmates. All the births happened at the hospital with the women shackled to the bed. While the whole situation was heart-breaking, the most appalling element was the lack of contact between the new moms and
their newborn babies. Mothers could only hold their children for a few moments after
delivery before they were ripped away by the nurses. At the Prison Birth Centre, women
found solidarity and prayer, and were given space in which to grieve and rejoice in the
days before and after delivering. Small comforts.

My jobs, then, were reading to the women and leading prayers. Playing music.
Teaching music. Listening. Many days there was no talking at all. Just the harmonics of
the guitar and the hard sobs of women who pined to hold their babies close. Sister
Therese acted as the women’s doula and she wanted to train me as well.

I liked handing over my guitar to the ladies, hanging back as they jammed. For
me, playing music was like being in the womb. Fully absorptive. It wasn’t like leaving
my body, but it’s so immersive and intimate, you can’t help but feel open to a divine
channel. I wanted the women of the Prison Birth Centre to have that opportunity, if they
also wanted it. To be dialled in and vulnerable in such an inhuman, dark place. I’m
impatient about some things. Okay, most things. But it was easy to teach those women.
All you need is the desire to learn, a modicum of hand-mind coordination, and the ability
to tolerate pain. Pressing acoustic strings is hard and sharp, and Martin silked strings
were too expensive, so it’s necessary to build callouses on the fingers. In the beginning,
it’s work. Hard work. Repetitive work. Then it clicks. Mel, nine months pregnant and
ready to pop, liked to play “I Fought the Law” when I visited. Yasmine, Renee, Peggy,
and Linda listened. Mel channelled playfulness and anger in her playing. Jamming and
laughing with the ladies, it was like the old days, in Brooklyn, with my band. Save the
viper den of drama and bags of cocaine. I found so much painful beauty in these women.
Their scars and stories. All the masks we wear and ways we hide. Though we cannot hide from God.

It was a rare moment of quiet when I arrived. Mel and Linda snoozed. Yasmine and Renee lay on their narrow beds, not reading or talking. There were no windows in the room at the centre. Dark concrete walls and heavy air doubled the sleepiness in the room.

“Aren’t they perfect?” Sister Therese pointed to the picture of Renee’s premature twins sharing one incubator. Renee was at risk of toxaemia during delivery but pulled through. What it must have been like to hold her fragile children for only a minute, as if in a dream.

“Littlest birds make the sweetest music,” Sister Therese said. “At our school, Jack Corolla perished,” she paused and made the sign of the cross, “as two new lives emerged across town.” Her blue eyes warmed the damp, musty room. “Miracles are everywhere. Praise be.”

The picture of the twins scared me. They were too small. Wires tangled over their impossible bodies. Renee had recently been sentenced to life in prison for an armed robbery that had resulted in the death of a security guard. She didn’t pull the trigger but she drove the getaway car.

“The kids are too tiny.” My eyes darted around the bare walls of the centre as I whispered to Sister Therese. The bottles of medicine and lotion and the boxes of tissues made me shake, reminding me of my last days in Brooklyn. “Will the twins survive?”

“Ask instead how we can support Renee.”

“Sorry.”

“Pray with us.”
We moved closer to Renee’s bed. I took off my gloves and held Sister Therese’s warm left hand. Sister Therese nodded to me, smiling with her big zipper grin, and I rested my hand on Renee’s shoulder. Renee inhaled sharply at my touch and the three of us prayed for the children. If only I possessed one ounce of Sister Therese’s strength, Sister Lourdes’s ease, or Sister Augustine’s rock-solid certainty. Or the survival instinct of the women in the centre.

“Wasn’t Prince Dempsey in foster care for a few years?” I asked Sister Therese after we prayed.

“Indeed he was.” She washed a glass in the small sink then handed it to me to dry.

“Poor Prince. The abuse he suffered. He was whipped with an extension cord.”

My lack of a reaction to that fact was almost shocking. “Did you take my blouse?”

“Our Guild blouses? No. Why?”

“Double-check when we return. It’s important.” I put my gloves back on and shuffled closer to Linda, who was serving a one-year sentence for selling meth. She lay in the supine position on her flimsy cot. Linda’s emergency C-section came as a surprise, but her baby boy was fine. A feisty sprite. In the picture on Linda’s chest, Sister Therese was holding him like a treasure.

“Linda, you said in our prayer circle last month that your daughter was taken by the state,” I said, “and placed in foster care.”

She nodded. “The most terrible day in my mostly terrible life.”

“Why did Child Services get involved, if I may ask?”

“You may. It was domestic violence.”
“What do you mean?”

“Brian smacked me around like it was his job. The only job Brian could keep. When he broke my nose, I pressed charges. Then I dropped them. I couldn’t live without him. Love is so, so, so dumb.”

“Amen,” I said.

Renee said “Amen,” from her bed.

Linda continued: “They thought Jenny – she was only four at the time – would be next to face his wrath, but Brian never touched her. He saved his rage for me. They took Jenny anyway and placed her with my half-sister, Heather, who lives in Florida. Heather won’t let Jenny visit me.”

“The state took your kid even though you were the victim?”

“Yes, honey.”

“Sorry. One more question.”

She held her picture and groaned as she tried to sit up. She lay back down.

“Okay.”

I leaned closer and whispered, “One of my students, a kid that I think is responsible for the fire at our school on Sunday night, was in foster care.”

“For how long?”

“Two or three years. Do you think that could have messed him up? Made him turn to violence or arson?”

“It’s hard to say, but everyone has different ways of responding to trauma. If he was abused in care, he might want to feel in control. He might not even realise it.”

“Sad.”
“Taking a kid away from the only home they’ve ever known, no matter how gross that home is, will make it hard for that kid to trust again.” She rubbed her fingers together and pinched her nose nervously. “Kids like routine. Jenny liked routine.” Her lips trembled.

I cleared my throat and asked, “Anyone doing time for arson?” Asking such a question was vile. And unnecessary. Sister Therese and Sister Augustine created the group to be a non-judgemental place. The goal was to support women in their most trying moments. The Sisters also offered services like confession, but less formal. If one of these women knew something about arson, maybe they could help me unlock this.

Mel answered, “No.”

Linda said, “Nope.”

“Not now,” said Peggy. “But I did. I did eight months for arson, back in Texas. Years ago.” She could not have been more than twenty-two years old, so it was hard to imagine what she meant by years. “Sister Therese mentored me this year, after Sammy was born. Sister Augustine mentored me last year,” Peggy added quietly, “after my first daughter was born.” Her green eyeshadow and black eyeliner were flawlessly applied. Peggy was obviously careful with details. Good characteristic for an arsonist.

“What?”
“Return to the crime,” said Peggy. “Like they’re checking out their art. CCTV caught the idiot unloading two refrigerator and a pizza oven the day before the joint went up. Fucking idiot. Husbands are the worst. I wanted my most recent spouse to live in the basement. He was a hoarder. Collected every useless piece of junk you can imagine. Husbands are good for one thing and even that thing they don’t always deliver, if you know what I mean. Oh, sorry, Sister! I mean—”

“No worries.” I winked. “I know what you mean.”

The ladies knew I was unusual, to say the least, but did they know I was queer? I hadn’t told them. They didn’t need to know and they probably wouldn’t understand. I didn’t have to come out. In my old life, one of my gay superpowers was making straight women feel relaxed enough to share their deepest, darkest secrets. I wasn’t a threat. I’d never steal their man. I wasn’t an object of desire. My presence opened them up somehow. I could learn a life story within five minutes of meeting someone. I enjoyed listening to them talk as much as I like hearing them play my guitar. It was another way I could serve them and God, to help the women feel less alone. And get dirt to nail Prince.

Sister Therese watched silently as she dried a white bowl with a threadbare blue dishtowel.

“Let’s pray, Linda,” I said. “Let’s pray for your daughter Jenny to feel the Holy Spirit again.”

“Thank you, Sister Holiday.” She blinked. “Can you hold my hand as we pray? I haven’t touched anyone in so long.”

I removed my gloves a second time and took Linda’s hands in mine. With my eyes closed I said, “‘Take pleasure in infirmities, in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships,
in persecutions, in difficulties,’ said Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:10, ‘for when I am weak then I am strong.’”

“Amen,” said Linda.

I loved praying with the new moms. The rhythm of Corinthians reset me, like a cold shower in the August heat. How Paul must have felt sitting down to write his words, as if he scribbled them just for me. Ever since I can remember, Scripture was alive in some way. The vitality of the Word pulsed inside me, even before I knew who I was. As kids, Moose and I always sat next to each other in church. Pews of the hardest wood. Sometimes we would slip into a staring contest during Father Graff’s homily. Though the Word mesmerised me, priests bored me. Father Graff gave the same droning homily on forgiveness so often, Moose and I played games to keep from falling asleep. It was cold in our dilapidated church, with a relentless wet draught from the Bay. The church was never silent thanks to the traffic from the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Mom rejected grand, marble churches, instead demanding our parish be Saint Peter’s, the smallest, oldest, coldest Catholic Church in Bay Ridge. Probably in all of New York. With most parishioners in their nineties, there weren’t enough kids to serve as altar boys, so Father Graff let me work. Moose and I stared until our eyes watered and he twitched in pain. My eyes burned too but I would be damned if I quit before him. I never wanted to quit before the eyes of God. It was usually a tie. After every parishioner had taken their holy communion, when it was time to kneel, I let myself go. With the Eucharist melting on my tongue, I let myself listen for God. Every Sunday with my face in my hands I left my body and yet felt grounded. I must have looked as deep in thought as I felt, because even
Sister Regina commented on my serious piousness. I recall Moose trying so hard to stifle his laughter.

“You’re even competitive about praying.” He elbowed me.

I winked. Of course I was.

Back on campus, late Tuesday evening, I couldn’t stop yawning. My left eye was still tender. Smoke had stitched itself into my lungs. I logged grades in the class roll. The clock in the staff lounge read 8 p.m. I was thirsty and faint with hunger. I needed to dine alone. I’d throw together simple fare: two hardboiled eggs, steamed greens from the garden, bread and butter. A satsuma from our convent tree. I could not bear talk of the fire with Sister Therese, or a passive-aggressive swipe from Sister Honour, or another lecture from Sister Augustine on moral conviction.

Sister Honour was particularly exhausting. She tried to land a verbal lash whenever she could. My mere presence made her sick. Sister Honour, with more than forty years of devotion as a Sister of the Sublime Blood, could not stand the fact that Sister Augustine had approved me for temporary vows as an aspirant in her order. Me, a lesbian. Or former lesbian. Tattooed. Thirty-three years old. Punk singer turned Catholic School music teacher. The exact opposite of the Catholic values she had pledge to uphold when she was only nineteen years old. She seemed to blame me for Lamont’s injuries. Probably the fire too. Didn’t even thank me for saving Jamie, for risking my life. Instead of continuing across the street to our kitchen, with its cacophony of clanging plates, grace, and gossip and the presence of Sister Honour’s judgemental eyes, I wandered outside. Maybe I could find a clue.
I glanced into the school courtyard. It was a searing night, hot enough to swim. Nonetheless, my gloves were on. I splayed my fingers and felt the gloves stretch. They were soft black leather, like an old-fashioned burglar costume. But they were no costume for me. The Sisters of the Sublime Blood was known as a progressive, more social justice-oriented order than others. Still, Sister Augustine demanded that I cover my tattoos. “You’ll cover yourself,” she said during our first meeting. “Your hands, your neck. The focus should always be on our work, on our devotion to God and the Word, not on us. What we do, we do for Him.” Her limbs seemed to ache with arthritis. She used to conduct morning song with her arms raised high, but in the past year, as our parishioners dropped off by the dozen, her hands have stayed tightly clasped. Under her black, polyester, shoulder-length habit, Sister Augustine’s mane of white hair glimmered as brightly as her green eyes. Our dwindling congregation made her worry, but the new faces in Mass were reassuring. It seemed nothing could dent her faith. I loved – needed – her stability. Her stubborn optimism.

I sat on a bench in the courtyard and looked at the yellow Do Not Enter police tape in front of the east wing. The air was misty. A dove rattled her throat. I felt I was being tracked, as if a locator device had been stuck on me and was blinking. But maybe it was the night creatures who were watching me. A bullfrog called from the east. Another answered from the west. I said a prayer of thanks for the small creatures I’d never see but let me know I was not alone. We share DNA with every living thing on the planet. That has to count for something. The wooden bench had started to splinter and bend from the insistent humidity. Jasmine dripped its sweetness into a gentle breeze. A roach, colourless
as a void, scuttled across in front of my feet then disappeared into a crack in the slate sidewalk.

My moment of peace subsided as the memory of Prince pissing on Jack’s shrine returned. I needed a drink. To the extreme surprise of everyone who knew me, I’d committed myself to the ascetic life three years ago, but I couldn’t break every vice. Not all at once. I swatted the mosquito that landed on my black pants. New Orleans mosquitos could eat through iron.

I noticed that the trash bin on the corner of Prytania and First was overflowing. I made sure no one was in eyeshot, then I walked over to the trash. There had to be clues in there. Someone had to get to the bottom of this and it might as well be me. Grogan, Decker, and Riveaux were useless. The first thing I found in the trash was a bottle full of piss. Probably Roy’s. Even with my gloves on it felt like touching poison. I found Zapp’s crawdad-flavour chip bags. Congealed pizza. Banana peels. Po-boy wrappers. Candy wrappers. A mask. Cigarette packs. I gagged again. The worst and most exciting things were the wet things. And weird stuff. Used Band-Aids. Dental floss. Chicken bones. Broken umbrellas from the innumerable New Orleans thunderstorms. Condom wrappers. A shopping list with a few items erased and few items remaining. Eggs. Bread. Coffee. Oranges. Tampons. Nothing seemed strange about it, but I knew better. First instincts were suspect. You have to look for the secret code. Not the obvious cipher, the one hiding inside the abstraction. Clues so invisible they were carried on the wind. I disregard the part of the message that looks like it was erased. Its sloppiness is deliberate, a trick to attract the eye. Instead, I needed to search for the missing spaces in a case – the
inconsistencies – and the places lies knotted up. After my rummage I peeled off my gloves and threw them in the trash. I ran up to my room to fetch a fresh pair.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. No. It was only the wind whipping as I returned to the courtyard. I sipped Southern Comfort and cringed. Ryan Brown had dropped the tiny bottle of Southern Comfort from his backpack earlier that day. He saw me see him drop it, and his face turned red. I didn’t report the students whose booze and weed and tobacco I confiscated. This bought me credibility, a highly desirable currency for a Louisiana high-school teacher. Somehow the flow of contraband vice was steady, despite attrition of students.

Big Red the rooster crooned. Night birds trilled. Voodoo hooked her soft, silky black tail around my calf. She looked at me with sweet mischief in her obsidian eyes. All of a sudden, a pack of students tumbled out of the main doors of the school’s west wing, donning masks, crowns, and costumes. A half dozen kids, utterly transformed in their iridescent colours, make-up, and extravagant costumes. It was the night of the Saint Sebastian’s Student Ball, the late summer prom for Catholic school students in our diocese. A mini Mardi Gras. Sister Augustine promised to keep the Ball on schedule, despite the fire, despite Jack’s death. The students needed “the creative outlet,” she said. John Vander Kitt would chaperone. It didn’t begin until dusk. Kids rarely showed up on time for class, but when it came to revelry, they were early. Riotous laughter tumbled from an approaching gaggle. Boys and girls alike wore curly wigs and long purple beads. Fleur wore a velvet dress and fishnet stockings. Chiffon. Silk. Satin. Kelly wore a corset and ruby red slippers. Rachel was dressed like Louis XIV. Kyoung and Jenny were
dressed like a punk Versailles court—flowing neon wigs, electric-blue eyeshadow, and powder-white foundation.

Fleur left the tangle and wondered to me and Voodoo who was now napping in the shade behind the bench. “Sister Holiday, it’s the Ball tonight!”

“Indeed.”

“Why aren’t you wearing a mask?” she asked.

“I am.”

“Oh. Really?” Sweat had smeared her thick make-up. “See you later.”

More students gathered in the courtyard. I couldn’t tell who the masked kids were, but I spotted Arjune Ruiz at nine o’clock, wearing gold and green tights and a long jacket with tails. On his head was an enormous pair of white papier-mâché antlers, like a powerful stag. I couldn’t imagine how he could dance so top heavy, but he didn’t seem to care. No one cared about much in this town, besides living and living well. In the infrequent letters I wrote to my brother and father, who still lived in the Brooklyn neighbourhood in which I was raised, I tried to describe the quirks of my new city. Ancient trees always in bloom. Certain neighbourhoods always in danger of catastrophic flood. New Orleans is gluttonous. Fancy. The kind of fancy that cuts you. Some days, it’s hard to tell if the streets are littered with diamonds or broken glass. But it’s so beautiful you have to touch it, bring your hands close to it. Like wispy fiberglass, New Orleans doesn’t feel like it is of this world, so you can’t help but touch it. But when you hold it tight, it shreds you with its invisible teeth. Once it’s inside, you can’t dig it out. Even the dusk carried toxic glamour, unsure if it would bring lightning bugs or a lightning storm. New Orleans was opulent in every way, especially in its punishment.
As if on cue, the air changed. Something reached into my mouth. A prayer in reverse. Fumes. The air burned. Smoke scratched the back of my lungs.

Not again.

“Sister Holiday,” Bernard screamed. He had run outside from the cafeteria in the basement. He waved his hands like a lunatic. “Sister, stay there. Tell the students to get back!”

“What the fuck?”

“Fire.”

“Stay there. There’s a fire in the cafeteria but I’ll put it out. It’s small. Smallish!”

“What?”

“I got this. Stay there!”

The students were running around in circles, confused, frantic. “Get back!” I snapped at them. Fleur’s wig and mask fell as she ran. Arjune held onto his antlers as he sprinted into Prytania Street.

“Where are you going?” I shouted to Bernard.

“To the shed to get a bucket. I called the fire department.” Bernard was panting, running around the corner to the shed at top speed. “They’re on their way. Don’t go in there!”

The shed was a few paces away, and I could have done it for him, but Bernard insisted. I herded the dozen costumed students safely to the street. Kelly cried. Rachel, dressed like the Sun King, fell. Her tights ripped. Arjune called his mother. “Another fire!” he fought back tears.
With the costumed students at a safe distance, I returned to the entrance of the cafeteria. I watched Bernard run back inside with two buckets.

“We’ve got the kitchen fire under control,” he said. The smoke was getting heavier, though. Chemical fumes were making me high. I started to walk closer to the door and he yelled: “Stay there!”

_Hail Mary._

“I want to help.” I pushed past him and ran inside the cafeteria’s main doors. I didn’t see flames, but the air made me choke. Smoke rolled over the glass. Along the ceiling.

At the bottom of the tall staircase connecting the basement cafeteria to the school’s central hall was a navy and white blanket.

But it wasn’t a blanket. It was Sister Therese laying at the bottom of the stairs.

“Sister Therese!” I ran to her. “No! Sister.”

Her veil was off, as was one shoe. Her body was face down. She was stiff but still warm. One black sock had worn out at the big toe.

I brought my fingers to her neck. No pulse. Her left ankle was twisted, bent impossibly backwards. She was motionless, stiff as the ground underneath her battered body. I searched the scene, looking for something – anything – out of the ordinary. I felt a familiar shape. My guitar pick, in Sister Therese’s pocket. I grabbed it quickly. Lights from fire trucks lit the hallway in orange. Sirens wailed, and I felt the sound hard, like punches in the back of the heart.

_Hail Mary, Mother Mary, full of grace. Hail Eve._
My eyes rolled back in my head. I sat with Sister Therese until the EMTs, faces I recognised from Sunday night, arrived.

“You okay?” asked Mickey.

“I’m okay but Sister Therese... she hasn’t moved.”

“Get outside.” He moved me out of the way and began to examine her. Before I was out the door, I heard him say “broken neck,” “broken teeth,” “no pulse.”

I returned to my bench outside, poured the rest of the Southern Comfort I had confiscated from Ryan down my throat. Fire engine #62 arrived.

Riveaux came into focus. She was wild-eyed but tired.

“Riveaux!”

She ran towards me, sweating through her short-sleeved button-down top. Then she turned abruptly and ran into the cafeteria. When she returned outside a minute later, she was cursing into her radio.

God exists and God is good, I chanted, to calm my heart. I was too shocked to cry. The contraband Southern Comfort had given me a micro buzz. Maybe it was the fumes. God exists and God is good.

Two news crews sped up. The broadcast vans lined the courtyard.

“It’s Tuesday evening and we’re live outside of Saint Sebastian’s Catholic School where sources say a member of the Sisters of the Sublime Blood is dead. Smoke is billowing out of the basement window, as you can see behind me,” said a reporter in a black suit, white shirt, and bright red tie. “Now, it seems we might have another unspeakable death just two nights after the deadly inferno tore through the east wing of this historic school.”
A firefighter bolted past the camera.

“Ventilating below grade areas is a challenge, one firefighter told me,” the reporter said into the microphone. “They put out the hot spots quick, but that could not prevent the loss of life, a Sister who lives and works right here at Saint Sebastian’s. Live on Prytania Street, I’m Adam Freret with KWNOL 4 News.”

Neighbours and parents began to gather in the street again, as they had on Sunday night, to watch the flames devour the east wing. The fire alarm was blaring. Then more people flooded into the streets. As I bent over coughing, my heart pounding, I saw them raise their hands to their mouths, astonished. Why had they come? To watch the ruin in real time? Claim the pain for themselves?

Thirty minutes later the cafeteria fire was extinguished. This time it only took three men and one orange fire hose.

Detective Grogan and Sergeant Decker charged to the cafeteria. As Riveaux was about to pass me, I stood in front of her.

“Riveaux.”

Her neck and chin dripped with sweat. She smelled like an ashtray and bitter orange. “Out of the way.” She pushed her glasses up her nose. As she walked to the cafeteria door I followed. “Stay outside. Who did you see leaving the cafeteria?”

“Bernard. Nobody else. What else do you know? Was the fire set in the same way as in the east wing? Was it arson?”

“Stay tuned for the press conference.” She pushed her thick glasses up her nose and ran into the cafeteria.
Sisters Lourdes, Honour, and Augustine arrived. Sister Augustine fought back tears, her hands together in prayer.

“She’s gone,” I said.

Sister Lourdes shook her head. “Our Father, who art in heaven.”

“I didn’t even get to say goodbye.”

“What happened?” asked Sister Augustine, her eyes bloodshot.


“I ran into the cafeteria when the fire started. Sister T was at the bottom of the staircase.” I choked on the acrid air. “Did any of you take my blouse?”

Sister Honour made the sign of the cross. “Have you lost your mind?” She closed her eyes. “Blouse? Sister Therese is dead!”

“Think. This is important.”

“No,” the Sisters replied in unison.

Riveaux walked swiftly out of the cafeteria doors. She traded words with a firefighter then moved over to me. We walked away from Sisters Augustine, Honour, and Lourdes who were all crying. Lourdes was practically hyperventilating. Riveaux looked over her left and right shoulders, and, dropping her voice, said to me: “They used kerosene as a starter and then ignited a pile of napkins on the pantry counter.”

“I need to see.”

“Stay outside.”

“What’s it like inside?”

“Surface burns. Pantry counter’s scorched. The toaster burnt – that was on its way out anyway, from the looks of it – but that was it.”
“Smells awful from here.”

“The team will deodorise the building with an ozone treatment. It could have been much worse.”

“Sister Therese is dead. How much worse?”

“It could have been an accident.”

“She wouldn’t have fallen. She was pushed.”

“If the fire was set near one of those deep fryers, with all that old oil and grease, the whole room would have ignited. The school would have lit up. The way it was done, though, so contained. This firebug is making a statement.”

“Saying ‘catch me if you can’?”

“Arrogant.”

“Prince is arrogant. And sadistic. He set other fires.”

“We’re looking at him – trust me. Focus on your students. The cafeteria will be habitable in a week, but we’ve got a firebug here. We have to close the school down.”

She tipped her head. “You’re not setting these fires, are you?”

“Me? Fuck no.”

“You curse a lot for a nun.”

Bernard Gregory came into view with a blue blanket around his shoulders and a large bandage on his forehead.

“Bernard!” I shouted. “What did you see down there? Did you hear anything? See anyone running away?”

“Nothing. Smoke was everywhere, all of a sudden, as I was walking through.”

“Sister, y’all done quite enough.” Riveaux turned me around. “Go home.” She
shut the ambulance door.

“I have something for you.”

“Yeah?”

“Bernard Gregory found a black blouse with a burnt sleeve yesterday morning.”

“Where is it now?”

“At his apartment. This was in Sister Therese’s pocket.” I pulled out my red guitar pick. “Someone is framing me.”

“You took evidence from the scene?” She grabbed it with a handkerchief and dropped it into a plastic bag. She shut it tight and placed the evidence bag into another bag.

“It’s my guitar pick.”

“You can’t—” She stopped mid-sentence. “Go home. Leave this to us. I will log this, get the blouse from Bernard, and we will examine them both for DNA. These are key pieces of evidence that you could have compromised.” She sped off.

Riveaux had said, “Leave this to us,” but Jack was dead. Sister Therese had been murdered. Prince Dempsey, or whoever the hell was behind this, was just getting started.

I walked into the church and slumped into the hard pew, buried my face in my open hands. I prayed for Sister Therese, Jack, Jamie. I prayed for Prince Dempsey and Detective Grogan. They were pricks, but of all of us, I was the most lost. I couldn’t run from it. I couldn’t escape the fire, or that night, no matter how fast and far I ran. No matter how much I prayed.

It was the last night I spent with my mother. In Brooklyn, late October. The wind, sweet with autumn decay, shook the leaves from the trees. The sidewalks had turned into
rivers of orange, gold, and red. I was on Mom duty because Pop was on cop duty and Moose had a work-mixer. I had watched every episode of *Poirot* and *Miss Marple* with Miss Marple the cat purring on my lap. I played Scrabble for both me and Mom. I read out the Scrabble tiles to Mom, who hadn’t said more than a few words all night. Guitar always made me feel anchored, present, dialled in. It was also a good way to fixate. I had played so much that my fingers stung.

“I need to get out,” said Mom. “Take me for a drive.”

“That’s a bad idea.”

“Please,” she pled, weakly. “Let me see the city I love.”

“Dad will kill me.”

“I need fresh air.”

“Okay.” I relented. “I can borrow the van.”

*It might be the last time she can leave on her own,* I thought. Mom had stopped eating all of a sudden. Could hardly walk. The cancer had spread much further and faster than the doctors thought. She needed fresh air, a break from the tyranny of sameness. Being locked in that stuffy, cramped apartment. A night drive with Mom seemed incredibly stupid but doable. I didn’t have a car, so I asked Audrey if I could borrow the band’s van, our beat-up junk-heap that we bought for five hundred bucks from her brother, Steve. The van was registered to Audrey, but me, Nails, Kim, and Audrey shared it for tours, gigs, and practice. Lugging amps, instruments, and cases of beer. Somehow, we managed to keep the thing intact despite the years of abuse, broken bottles, and recklessness driving. The theatrics and antics of punks who refused to grow up. Never once we change the oil, rotate the tires, or check the alignment.
An hour later, Audrey drove the van to Greenpoint. She texted: *Van outside but gas tank empty. Parked on Russell near Driggs. I’m going to Dobranoc if you wanna join. you should get out of the city tho. Take her somewhere quiet. So sorry about Toni even though she always hated me luv you ☺ xx*

I still had my van key on my keychain. Miracle I hadn’t lost it by then. Or traded the van for cash after losing a poker game. Not that our band’s hell-on-wheels was worth more than ten dollars. I brushed my teeth, changed into clean clothes, and helped Mom down the steps carefully in her nightgown, robe, and slippers. She was lighter than a rosary.

We drove slowly through the labyrinthine Greenpoint streets. Mom sat in the passenger seat.

“Nothing prettier than the city at night.” She let her head rest against the glass.

I readjusted the passenger wing mirror to catch brief glimpses of her eyes, to see what she was seeing.

After gassing up the van at Exxon, eking out extra fuel by shaking the nozzle a few times, we hit the road again. Brooklyn was alive with revellers, sound, and light. A couple in matching neon pink suits biked past the van on a tandem bicycle, cruising past a stop sign.

“Bike lanes in Brooklyn,” Mom whispered. “Never thought I’d live long enough for that.”

I parked in front of the dive bar near the river where Audrey said she’d be. Outside the bar we sat for ten minutes, van engine idling.
“What does Dobranoc mean?” I asked Mom. In all the years I had patronised that bar, I never thought to ask about the name.

With her eyes closed, she said, “It’s Polish for ‘good night.’”

“I’m thirsty. Let’s go into ‘good night’ a mother-daughter drink.”

“Here is fine.”

“Just one drink.”

“I need to rest.”

“Mom, you have to come with me. I can’t leave you here alone.”

“I want to stay…and look at my city.” She smiled but it was forced. Her face was being slowly erased.

“The river is pretty tonight,” I said.

“You go.”

“Okay. I’ll go in for one drink and be right out.”

I buckled Mom’s seat belt and put a blanket on her lap. I pulled up the van’s emergency brake, and cranked up the heat. I turned on the public radio channel, my mom’s favourite. She loved listening to real, unedited voices. Said it was holy. I locked the van doors.

Audrey was dancing inside the bar as I walked in. A riot of ruby red hair with messy red fringe above her cat-eye make-up and winged ink-black eyeliner. She danced alone in the corner. Spinning around and around, fast and warped, like a vinyl record so good it gets played out of shape. Audrey never gave a fuck. Madcap Audrey. Beautiful and radiant. Always.

She waved when she saw me. “Holidaaaay!”
“Hey.”

“You came. Let’s toast.”

That night, with Pop on overnight duty and Mom locked in the idling van, I drank. One beer turned into two. Then four. Drink after drink. Audrey went outside every fifteen minutes to check on Mom.

“How is Sister Antoinette?” I asked, with my head on the bar. One eye opened, one eye closed.

“She’s okay. Sleeping.” She put her hand on my shoulder. “Her talk radio is on. Heat is on. She’s curled up like a beagle. She seems peaceful. At least she’s not stuck in that bedroom. No offence to Frank, but she should be in the hospital.”

“I’m ruining this all.” I did a shot of tequila, then rested my forehead on my wrists. “I’m a fuck-up.”

“You’re wasted, hon. But you’re still beautiful.”

I smiled.

“It’s good to see you smile for once.” She kissed me. Her warm lips on mine. I opened my mouth and she lightly traced my bottom lip with her tongue. I remember how she tasted, like green olives and vodka. She put her hand on my right bicep, on my tattoo of “Sister Antoinette.” My mom’s name when she was a nun. Before she left her Order, her religious family, to start a different family. What a disappointment Moose and I were. The cursive letters coiled around a red chancel lamp, the perpetually burning tabernacle lamp. Mom told me about the lamp, its ever-present flame, when I was ten years old. Its incandescence symbolised pure light, a beacon in a sin-darkened world. It was one of my first tattoos.
“I need another drink,” I said. The bartender looked over her shoulder with pity in her eyes. “House tequila with extra tequila in it.”

“Sweet pea, you don’t want the house tequila,” said the bartender as she flipped her filthy towel over her tattooed shoulder. “It’s like lighter fluid.”

“Lit lighter fluid,” Audrey said.

“That’s exactly what I want.”

“Here, darling. It’s my treat.”

“She thinks I’m hot,” I told Audrey.

“Dear Lord.” She rolled her eyes. “Stop.”

I leaned over the bar. “Hey.”

“What’s up?” the bartender asked as she rinsed a glass.

“Want to make out later?”

“Sure,” said bartender with smile. “Why not? We close at 4.”

Audrey pulled the back of my shirt and I landed on the bar stool. “You are the fucking worst.”

“What?”

“I’m sitting right here.”

“We’re not dating.”

“Right. Why would I think that? You know everything about me. You have my name tattooed on your arm.”

“I have lots of names on my arm,” I said. “I thought we were ‘best friends.’”

“Who’ve been fucking for years.”

“We haven’t hooked up in months. Six months at least.”
“Forget it. I’m going to go check on your mother,” she said. “You stay with the hot barmaid.”

“I will. Thanks for your permission.”

I recall Audrey checking on mom, who was fine. After another shot, I stepped into the storeroom where I enjoyed a hot and heavy make-out session with the bartender on a vintage pinball machine that was out of service.

When we finally emerged, it was 2 a.m. Audrey was chatting with a woman who looked like a blue-haired Ariel from Little Mermaid. I patted my pockets to make sure I had my wallet and keys, and noticed people gathering at the door and the windows.

“What’s going on?” I asked Audrey.

“Not sure. Looks bad. You look bad.” She wiped smeared lipstick from my neck and rolled her eyes. “Did you check on your mom?”

“Um, yeah,” I lied. I hadn’t checked on her in an hour. I was doing shots and doing the bartender in the back room.

“Fire!” A man at the window shouted. “Something is on fire outside!”

“Oh, fuck.” Audrey stood quickly, her eyes terrified.

My stomach sank. Mom.

We pushed our way to the door, but it was jammed with people. When I spilled onto the street, I saw it. Our band’s van was ablaze, with my mother locked inside.

So drunk I could hardly stand, I tried to run down the street, but everything was in slow motion. I needed to open the door, unlock her seatbelt, pull Mom out. Sirens blared. As I was about to reach the van, I was restrained by two cops. I swung my arms, tried to punch and wriggle free.
“She’s in there!”

“Who?” asked one of the cops.

“My mother! She’s in the van.”


“Get her out! Let me get her. Mom!” I howled.

“Sorry but there’s nothing you can do.”

With the cops holding me, I watched helplessly as mom burned alive in the locked van.

“My mother! Get her out!”

Six police cars and two fire engines had arrived and worked the scene.

No screams from inside the car pierced the night air. Only the cries from the horrified onlookers on the street and the thundering voices of fire and water from the powerful hoses.

It was a cold October night, but the fireball was so intense, everyone on the street was sweating.

My father and brother sat in the front of dad’s cruiser. Dad refused to talk to me. Wouldn’t even look at me. Moose couldn’t stop crying. Tears and snot pouring soaking his beard.

“It was an accident! Dad, please. Forgive me! Please talk to me.”

Dad got out of his car, then fell, sobbing. His knees cracked the pavement.

“What the hell happened?”

A fireman turned to me. “That your van?”
“It’s mine, technically,” said Audrey through tears. “We all share it. The band, I mean.”

“The vehicle caught fire,” the fireman explained. “It was either a fuel leak or power-steering leak. Have you had it serviced in the past few months?”

“Been years,” Audrey said through tears.

“You gas up the van tonight?”

“Yes.” I cried.

“It must have been running rich.”

“What?”

“You used too much fuel.”

“Fuck.” Then you parked over dry leaves. Some drunk probably threw a cig. Or a match. The fire started beneath the van.” He pointed at the ground. “It went up. Fast.”

“No. Dad! Talk to me.”

“Holly, come here.” Audrey tried to hug me.

I pushed her. “I don’t accept this. I cannot believe this.” I paced, muttering – *this isn’t happening, this isn’t happening.* “It was an accident. I take it back. I take it all back.” That’s when it blinded me. My penance. My path. Right there on the smoky street. I would join the convent, like my mother had done. I would devote myself to the liturgy. Atonement.

“Dad!” I screamed but he wouldn’t look at me.

A week after the accident, after Mom’s funeral, after dad buried any case of foul play, getting me and Audrey off the hook, the last favour he’d ever do for me, I cancelled every music lesson. I sold my electric guitar. My baby. My graphite Stratocaster. With
that five-hundred dollars, I took a taxi to JFK airport and bought a one-way ticket to New Orleans. Sister Augustine seemed suspicious of my tale of woe on the phone. At least she had agreed to meet with me. People travelled to the Crescent City to get lost, hide out, reinvent themselves. I needed more than to remake myself. I needed to be reborn.
Chapter 9

The school was closed for a week, Wednesday to Wednesday. Riveaux said she had fetched the blouse from Bernard and logged it and the pick into evidence. Crews cleaned and deodorised the cafeteria. Near the teeming flowers and twisted wrought iron of the courtyard gate, Sister Augustine prayed every morning. *Jeremiah* 17:14: “Heal me, O Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise.”

Sister Augustine raised her arms high.

With no class on Tuesday, I could have laid low, but I dashed out in the early morning. I wasn’t scheduled to work a shift at the Prison Birth Centre, but I needed to see the ladies. Linda, Mel, Yasmine, Peggy, Renee. Despite the metal detectors and mould and byzantine brutality – no babies, no windows, nothing soft or plush, only harsh fluorescent lights indicating night and day – it a strange comfort to be there.

The five women sat in a semi-circle while I strummed Fleetwood Mac’s *Dreams*. I wanted to play something cool but easy. Something that sauntered. Mel and Peggy flipped through old magazines. Linda, Yasmine, and Renee stared aimlessly. My goal in the Prison Birth Centre, and when I performed on stage, which felt like ancient history at that point, was to be present. To surrender to the song. In a crowded dive bar, I had to play with enough confidence to break through the clutter. In prison, you had to play with enough fireworks to overcome the crushing boredom. I enjoyed the challenge, drawing people into a moment. It’s what God wanted from me.

Renee asked about Sister Therese. “When’s the funeral?”

“It already happened. Distant family members only.”
“She was family to me,” said Yasmine.

“Me too.” Renee hacked a wet smoker’s cough. “She looked like my Aunt Ruth.”

Linda said nothing. She was broken. Sister T helped her push during her delivery.

She helped bring her bring new life into this brutal world.

“I am blessed to have known her,” I said, holding Linda’s strong hands in my small, gloved hands.

How I appreciated the women of the Prison Birth Centre, their trampled beauty.

Mel’s bedazzled nails and nose ring. Yasmine’s shaved head. Peggy’s long red hair.

Linda’s curly blonde hair. So many ways to be a woman. I had more empathy for these badass ladies than for Sister Honour or Sister Lourdes. I saw myself more in those women – criminals. We all had tattoos, scars, secrets. We all wanted to be forgiven.

I removed my gloves and Peggy took my hands in hers.

“Lost” – she read the letters on my knuckles slowly – “soul.” She squeezed my hands. “You’re not lost, Sister Holiday. Not anymore.”

The rust-red sun was still powerful as I walked the few blocks to St Charles, to the streetcar stop. Phlox bowed in the wind. No powerlines above. Cables and wires are buried deep underground due to hurricanes and tearing gales. Everything in New Orleans is overdue, overgrown, dripping. Hold on tightly. Even the railings serve attitude. Purple and green Mardi Gras beads dangle from iron banisters. The oak trees decked with boas of Spanish Moss. Frogs party all night. Creaking and peeping until the moon sets.
I was en route to see Jamie West, who was still in hospital. Rosemary Flynn and I had made a plan to visit. Jamie had lost so much blood when the transom glass lodged in his thigh that he went into hypovolemic shock. His blood transfusion and skin-grafting operations were successful, but he was still being monitored for organ failure. I needed to ask him about Sunday night.

As I dug in my bag for streetcar fare, the only money I had, I noticed Rosemary’s ruler. I didn’t remember borrowing it. I jostled five quarters for the streetcar in the cup of my hand. I liked their weight and music. The streetcar arrived on time – a rarity. Taking two entry steps in one climb, I boarded, dropping the five quarters into the fare box.

The streetcar was crowded with people. On every streetcar ride, I tried to figure out one clue about each person. Maybe their neighbourhood of residence or job. A little sleuthing game to keep me occupied. To my right was a sousaphone player, probably on the way to a gig in the Quarter. I called her Diana in my mind. Two students traded gossip. I figured they were Tulane law students. I called them Drake and Chelsea. There was one seat near an open window. I took it. It had to be 99 degrees with 99 per cent humidity. The air carried distinct aromas – gardenia, jasmine, sweet olive, and the caustic smell of rotting rubbish.

Wearing my Order-issued black polyester trousers, black blouse, black scarf tied in a knot at my throat, and my requisite black gloves, I wondered if, to any untrained eyes on the trolley, I looked like a catering waitress, not a Sister on the edge of permanent vows. People asked the same questions about vows. Three years of temporary vows, then a final vow. Yes. I indulged their questions. The vow of poverty meant no dining out. No car. No computer. Wearing socks until my toes poked through, like Sister Therese.
Taking the streetcar only if it was too far to walk, the change for the fare saved from any modest holiday gifts from the parents of my music students. The poverty vow is a blessing, a promise to reject the temptations of modernity: no smartphone, modest clothing, no make-up, no jewellery. No more manicures. I owned nothing. Counter to most people’s assumptions, being a nun is the easier path – patriarchy and all – for someone like me: addictive personality, indecisive gerbil wheel of a mind. The Order strips away the bullshit.

It also puts me on a different plane. I have no clue what’s happening in culture. What’s in or out? Who’s stirring conversation? How much time are people collectively wasting on social media that could be devoted to curing cancer? At least the Sisters of the Sublime Blood Order was founded to do something good. To change the world.

The wooden seat buckled as the streetcar rolled towards New Orleans City Hospital. I liked the bass rumble of the trolley on its electric tracks. Every set of train tracks was an equal sign. Metal peal of the real streetcar bell. Real bells. Real things. That’s what I needed.

The streetcar rumbled a stop on Napoleon Street. Mardi Gras beads hung from the branches of the live-oak trees. Again, I felt that eyes were hunting me. It must have been the two feral cats sauntering near the sweetbell shrub. One cat stopped, licked her brown paw and used it to wash her face. Cats use their spit to bathe. We all want to be clean, but different paths get us there.

The streetcar began again. Three police cars passed us. The frequency of patrols was increasing. On Canal Street I alighted on the southbound corner. Purple crepe myrtle and wisteria tentacles swayed in the cross-breeze. A row of traditional, one-level shotgun
homes: bright orange window frames, mint-green wooden shutters, a blue roof apron, and bright white columns. On a nearby porch a cat meowed.

Across the street a familiar face stared at me. Two familiar faces. It was Prince Dempsey and BonTon. I walked closer. BonTon’s white fur seemed shinier. Her ears, two triangle flops. I saw countless pit bulls with their ears savagely maimed. Bastards cut them because a pit bull’s natural floppy ears make her look adorable. Killers can’t be cute. I was surprised that Prince hadn’t cropped BonTon’s ears. He was probably selling it. Sick fuck. *Hail Mary.*

“You following me?” I asked.

Prince flicked his PRINCE cigarette butt into the street. BonTon exhaled through her big pink nose. “*You’re* following me,” he said. “Got a trace on me?”

“What are you doing here?”

“Me and my girl are out for a walk. Enjoying sunshine and freedom. Is that a crime?”

“What are you doing with that pit bull, really? Selling it for drug money? To a dog fighter?”

“You see the worst in people.” He flicked his lighter on then blew out the orange flame. BonTon snorted.

“You bring out the worst in people. I’m calling Animal Control on you.”

“Chill, Sis. Chill. I rescued this sweet baby.” He kissed BonTon’s white head and she blinked slowly. “She was chained up outside in the hundred degree heat all summer.”

“Good of you to save her.” I kicked the gravel.
“Her pups all died. She was alive when I saved her from that pit. She’s a survivor, like me. We rose from the ashes. Ain’t that right, Bonnie?” He kissed the dog’s white head again.

“If and when you are arrested, that pup will get a free ride to the kill shelter. Common practice, you know, for the city to take control of felons’ animals.”

“You threatening my girl?”

“Tell me what you know about the fires, about Jack and Sister Therese?”

“What’s in it for me?”

“Tell me.”

“Give me an incentive and I’ll think about it.”

“Tell me now, motherfucker.”

“Oh, wow.” He laughed. “Sister, you’re gonna pop, ain’t you? We have places to be. Bye, for now.”

As he turned to walk up the street, he started whistling. Careful that no one was watching, I shoved him hard in the back. So hard he cracked his head on the fence.

BonTon went berserk. Prince fell into the tree.

He turned around to face me, blue eyes raging, and I grabbed Rosemary’s ruler from my bag. *Crack.* I lashed his knees with the ruler. With all of my force. *Hail Mary.*

“Fuck!” He howled and BonTon howled too. “That was a mistake. A nun hitting a student. A kid.” He wiped blood from his forehead. “You’re gonna lose your job.”

“Eighteen is technically an adult.”

“I’m special needs.” He held up his diabetes monitor.
“No witness.”

“I’ll show them my knees.”

“I’ll say you fell skateboarding. Next time, do as you’re told.”

He put his bloody finger in his mouth. “You’re done.”

I smiled. “Game on.”

Pushing Prince Dempsey, knowing I could hurt him, even break him – it was exquisite.

Prince spat blood and said “bitch,” then started whistling.

I pivoted and walked down St Charles towards the New Orleans City Hospital, fireball of sun glowing overhead. God forgive me, I realized how much I missed fighting. I was good at it. It had been more than three years since my last fight. When some douchebag in the Brooklyn bar grabbed Audrey’s ass as she ordered a drink, causing Audrey to run to the stage and get me.

That was then. Before my conversion. Before the light found me. I had finished the second song of my band’s first set. Feeling great. High and buzzed on whiskey but fully pinned to the moment. In a gig like that, the riot of a punk song is a conduit. The voltage is high, cacophony at full tilt, like jumping into the cockpit of a plane that’s about to crash into a mountain. Shredding electric guitar isn’t as much about taming as much as it’s about riding a tsunami. Bringing a whole sonic palette – pushing and pulling – into conversation. Thrashing power chords. Gorgeous distortion, dissonance. It’s a form of whole-body prayer.

Audrey ran up to the stage, cursing. It wasn’t the first time she was groped. But I was enraged and needed to hurt someone. I didn’t need to sleuth too hard to find the
aggressor. We walked up to each dude, asking, “Did you grab my friend?” The guy in a jacket declaring VARSITY LINEBACKER in red thread was the only one looking down, laughing heartily. I poked him in his thick chest. “It’s you.”

He had a buddy with him. The guy was so tall I had to jump and punch simultaneously for the element of surprise. But I made contact. I scratched his chin with one of my half-dozen rings. With a slow blink he touched his fresh scrape. Then he pushed me with all of his force into the wall.

“Fuck.” I saw triple. The back of my head had cracked against the wall. And I was drunk. A rickety wooden coat rack toppled over.

“Some dyke’s gunning for Jones,” cackled the buddy next to the linebacker, who was wearing brown Dockers, brown shoes, brown shirt. “Classic.”

The linebacker’s phone had fallen out of his pocket. I picked it up and stood, slowly, on wobbly legs.

“Kick him in the nads,” shouted Audrey from the far corner of the bar. She was wearing sunglasses inside the dark bar. She had popped her left contact lens out when we were snorting crushed Adderall on a metro card after making out in the corner before I stepped on stage. The only prescription glasses she had in her purse were her sunglasses. She leaned over the cluttered bar, collecting other people’s leftover drinks, which she poured into her own glass.

“Holiday, fuck him up,” caroled my bandmember, Nails. Her name was Tonya, but we all called her Nails. The band didn’t mind when I got into a fight. They usually cheered me on. I knew it was futile to fight with a guy made of titanium. He was a foot taller and one hundred pounds heavier than me. Like everything else, though, I didn’t
think it through. I was wired. And this predator in the starched shirt and expensive shoes and football jacket needed to get put down.

Audrey walked next to me and looped her arm through mine. “You grab women without consent?” she asked the guy.

“Yeah.” He laughed. “My president does it. It’s my right as a patriotic American to do whatever – or whoever – the fuck I want.”

All four of us were standing by that point. Me, Audrey, the linebacker, and his buddy. Even in our high-heeled shoes, Audrey and I barely cleared the men’s shoulders.

“Apologise to her.” I pointed to Audrey. “Apologise to all women everywhere.”

The linebacker grabbed his phone back from my small hands. My fingers were strong from decades of playing guitar – my grip tight – but he was strong. He tapped Audrey’s forehead with his sausage-sized index finger. “I wanted a handful of Nubian Princess here. You pretty ladies need to relax. Gimme a smile.”

I pivoted to the left, grabbed a full glass of beer from the edge of the bar, and threw the beer his face. He was drenched. His soaked shirt revealed his muscular chest. His phone dropped at my feet. I grabbed it again and sank it into an unsuspecting woman’s glass of vodka cranberry on ice. “You needed an upgrade.” It worked. I landed a punch. Not an actual punch but I got his goat all the same.

He reached his hand into the glass for the phone that was now submerged.

“Dragon bitch.”

When I said “fuck off,” the presence of God, of divinity, was as real and invisible as sound coming out of my mouth.
As quickly as the beer was thrown and the phone destroyed, I felt my body fly again. From behind this time. I was being carried outside of the filthy bar by a police officer whose bulletproof vest was hard against my back. His dark blue jacket sleeves carried the cedar cologne of winter air. I didn’t kick or fight. Being carried was a relief.

“Nice and quiet,” the officer said as we headed outside. “That’s it. You’re done.”

On the kerb, the sounds of the jukebox, glasses, and a bar tussle faded as the officer placed me on my feet silently. His partner, a blonde female officer of the same height, stood next to him.

“No fucking way,” the male officer said in an incredulous tone as he scanned my ID. “Keating. Check this out. This is Holiday.”

“Yeah? And?”

“Walsh’s daughter.”

“Oh, fuck,” said Officer Keating, a handsome blonde woman whom I had noticed more than once at the precinct on my visits to my father, a sergeant in Brooklyn’s thirty-ninth precinct. “Another fight get broken up by the cops. Having a good time? Makin’ memories? What else have you got on your agenda tonight? Holdin’ up a bodega?”

“What a waste,” the male officer, Angelero, said. He spat on my black shoes.

“Any idea how bad you’re disappointin’ your old man?” Officer Keating said, her bulletproof vest pressing into my back. “Sergeant Walsh is a good guy. And you’re killin’ him.”

“I’m good at my work – what can I say?”

A small crowd had inched out of the bar, some with coats but most without, to watch the unfolding drama.
“Your old man ain’t gonna keep bailin’ your sorry ass out every time you get picked up,” Keating said.

Officer Angelero said, “Keating, remember last year after that brawl at The Boiler Room when Holiday spent the night in the holding cell cos we forgot to tell ole Chief Walsh?”

“This is ringing a bell. Holiday spent the whole night in the pen even though chief was always reminding us to call ’im up when she gets picked up. But we forgot.”

“Temporary amnesia I think it’s called.”

“We both had it. What a shame.”

“Wasn’t that the night Miss Holiday got pummelled?”

“Oh, right. Got her head bashed in by that sweet Loisaida trio. Broken nose. Couple of stitches needed on the chin, if I can remember correctly.”

Keating brought her face close to mine. “You’re a dyke, right? You musta made a move on one of ’em. Got your comeuppance.”

They both laughed. I spat in her right eye.

Silence for a moment. Then I laughed so hard I choked.

Once it registered what I had done it was too late. Angelero spun me around to face the police car, and slapped handcuffs on me. I bucked, trying to slip out of his hold.

As I squirmed, I smashed the right side of my face against the car roof. The crack of my head against the car was so loud the bar revellers went quiet. Angelero pulled my hands tighter behind my back. My shoulders felt like they were going to snap.
Officer Keating grabbed a fist full of my hair and smashed my face into the roof of their car again. “Take it easy.” Then she did it again. Fireworks behind my eyes.

“Easy, now. Don’t resist.”

“Stop.” Audrey’s voice sliced through the air. “Police brutality,” she shrieked. She stubbed her cigarette and filmed the scuffle with her phone. “She’s not resisting! I’m calling Legal Aid. Gay bashing! Everybody, look.”

They turned me around to face them and the crowd.

“Call the cops.”

“Fuckhead, they are the cops.”

People took photos with their phones. “Police brutality.”

Salty heat boiled the corner of my mouth. When Keating smashed me against the roof the last time, I bit deep into the front of my tongue. A tooth broke in half – my left canine.

The officers saw my bloody mouth and jumped back.

“Screw it,” said Angeler, who was shaking his head rapidly. “I need a video of me on YouTube like I need a cherry bomb up my ass.”

The officers loosened the handcuffs, turned my woozy body around. They returned to their muddy car and sped away before the female officer even had her door closed.

Audrey ran to me, moved blood-smeared hair out of my eyes. She kissed my cheek and I groaned. The crowd thinned. Other revellers sauntered away, like nothing had happened, in the direction of the subway. Talking, howling, laughing.

In the balsam of winter air, electrified by mouth pain, we walked, arm in arm, towards the subway. As we moved, she wiped blood from my lips and chin with my plaid scarf. My buzz faded as fast as my mouth bled. I looked down at the back of my right hand. My crown of thorns tattoo – so recognisable from sacred art – was deconstructed and inked around my right forearm. It was smeared with my blood. I would never know sacrifice like Jesus. No one could. Which is why I needed to be reminded of him every day. I wanted to wear the symbol of his pain, his gift. Thorns on thin wires, like musical notes on lines, marks indicating where and how to give voice to the unheard. I hoped his light would seep into my skin, strengthen me, like an IV.

With the tip of my tongue I tasted metallic blood. “Dear Lord.”

“What?” Audrey asked.

“Nothing. Just talking to God.”

That’s how it was with me and Audrey. Trouble always found us. Tested us. The important tests hid in most unexpected moments.
I held my breath as I entered the hospital to visit Jamie. Anxiety coiled in my chest at the sight of IVs and stretchers. The loud white of the medical coats. I leaned against the cool grey wall and closed my eyes.

“You okay?”

I opened my eyes and saw John Vander Kitt’s earnest face. His presence at the hospital’s main entrance surprised me. He sipped from his thermos.

“Praying for Jack’s and Sister Therese’s souls,” I said. “And for Jamie.” It was true that I had been praying for Jamie to recover. Praying for the miracle of teenagedom. Not that teenage life is miraculous on its own, but being sixteen years old offers the unique chance to live between being a kid and an adult. It made sense. To me at least.

“Wasn’t sure if you’d be here,” I said to John.

“Rosemary said she was coming to see Mr West. I wanted to be part of the pep rally too.”

“When will he be discharged?” asked Rosemary, who had joined the group. She had changed clothes since I had last seen her. Every time Rosemary entered my field of vision, she was wearing a different outfit.

“Jamie will be released in a few days,” said John. “He’s a strong young man.”

We slowly climbed the stairs to the fourth floor, where a nurse’s station – a long, counter-high kitchen island – buzzed with activity. I counted three computer monitors for six nurses. The hospital’s budget was tight, like every other institution that survived Katrina.
As John recited numbers, looking for Jamie West’s room – “Fourteen, sixteen, eighteen,” he said each number aloud – I noticed one nurse checking Facebook on a display monitor next to another nurse who was waiting, his hand underneath the tray, for a sheet of paper to emerge from the laser printer. The nurses were male and female, tall and short, and of different races with different hairstyles, but they were all united by the same powder-blue scrubs. The air-conditioning was severe. Rosemary’s teeth chattered. I was glad to be wearing gloves.

“Mr West,” John said, beaming as he saw Jamie beyond his hospital room door, which was ajar.

I toddled into the room. Close to Jamie’s bedside, I focused on him and tried to ignore the stethoscope. Cables spooled around the metal arms of the blinking monitors that tracked his vital signs. One machine beeped as steadily as a metronome.

“How are they treating you, besides the gourmet food?” I asked.

“Fine,” replied Jamie. He moaned softly as he tried to sit up straight in his bed.

“What is the craziest thing you’ve seen this week?” I sat down on a soft purple chair. I tried to keep my gaze on Jamie, but in the corner of my eye I noticed a newspaper with headlines about suicides and bombings. Someone must have left the newspaper in his room yesterday when they visited. A parent or grandparent? Where were Jamie’s mother and father?

Jamie turned away from me. He couldn’t look at me. “I’m, like, trippin’ on these pain pills.”

“No shame in that game.”
He yawned. “I can’t tell what’s day and what’s night. I did see a guy get wheeled in with a screwdriver sticking out of his eye socket.”

“He really got screwed.”

“Sister.” Rosemary Flynn, the behaviour police.

Jamie groaned. “They catch the assholes who did this?”

“No. They’re useless.” I sighed. “I could have solved this by now if they’d let me see the evidence.”

“Confidence,” said Rosemary, “or arrogance?”

“Both.”

“The east wing will be out of commission for two years, at least. Probably needs to be razed.” John sipped more coffee. “The basement fire barely damaged the cafeteria. If it had hit a fryer, the whole basement would have ignited.”

I was surprised that John knew so many of the details Riveaux had shared with me. Was she telling everyone on campus confidential information?

Jamie turned his head towards the window, still avoiding my eyes. “I saw someone – or something – that night.”

“What do you mean?” John stole my question.

“I saw a shadow in the hallway as the fire started. I started screaming so they’d know where we were.”

“Maybe the smoke was making you hallucinate,” said John.

“Have Detective Grogan and Sergeant Decker questioned you?” Rosemary asked, giving the “t” in Sergeant extra punch.
“They came in a few days ago. Not sure which. I can’t keep the days straight. I sleep during the morning and I’m awake all night.”

In his white hospital gown, in his white motorised bed, with dark stubble and a slim moustache, Jamie West looked like a man with no home, no family, no one to bug him about a clean shave. I turned from him and ambled over to the window. Steam rose from the asphalt of a parking lot, braiding the air into a tessellation.

I read seriousness knitted into Jamie’s eyebrows. Something gnawed at him. Like he wanted to talk about it but didn’t know how. As someone who had cultivated my skills as a secret-keeper when I was closeted, and now, as a practising Sister, I was attuned to the emotional espionage of others.

“You still hurting?”

“The scar is real itchy but I’m pretty numb. The meds keep me floaty. It’s, like, really, really boring.”

His eyes drifted to the foam tiles of the hospital ceiling that had a million perforations. Tiny eyes, always watching.

“What else do you remember about the fire?” I asked. “Do you recall anything about that night besides thinking you saw someone? Anything you didn’t tell Grogan or Decker or Riveaux?”

“Naw. One minute everything was dope.”

“Dope means positive,” I told Rosemary.

“Lamont and I were… well, he got new sick kicks. We were chillin.’”

I turned to Rosemary again. “‘Sick’ also indicates ‘good.’”

“I know what ‘sick’ means.”
“Kicks are shoes.”

She rolled her eyes.

I leaned close to Jamie and whispered, “I know why you and Lamont in the school so late.”

“My head hurts so much.” He groaned. “Talking makes my head hurt.”

“It’s okay. You can tell me anything.” I tried to take Jamie’s right hand in my hands, but he pulled away. “I presume you and Lamont are or were in a relationship.”

“Let him rest,” said a nurse who had marched into Jamie’s room with a clipboard and paper cup of water. She tried to hand him the water, but he didn’t take it. She placed it on the bedside table. Her white sneakers squeaked as she strode to the computer terminal in the corner. “Visiting hours are over, thank you,” she said flatly as she typed. To Jamie she said, “How’s our favourite patient today?” But he didn’t answer. His eyes were closed as if he had fallen asleep, but I knew he was faking.

Class was set to resume on Wednesday, but absence notes flowed in. Worried moms and dads kept kids home from school. One police officer was stationed inside the school and one was stationed inside the church, but parents were terrified. Energy was low. Spirits were fracturing. Classes were thinning out, but daily Mass had never been so full. Father Reese added two new services to the weekly service schedule to accommodate the crowds.

That Wednesday morning, I sat on the church steps in the gauzy heat. The candle-lit sidewalk shrines had tripled. Every day there was a new candle, flower, note, or prayer
card for Jack and Sister Therese. Sister Augustine often stood silently in her office window staring out at the shrine. Grief never goes away fully, but if it can be shared, it can be managed.

Parents showed up before classes began. Some were cursing. Many were crying. Some parents and students were holding hands, praying. But wait. Why was Jason Curtis there? He had theatrically pulled Patrick out of school. Already transferred to Saint Ann’s, according to Shelly.

“Mr Curtis?” I walked to up to question him, but he gathered Patrick and they walked away swiftly through the courtyard.

“Every single locker needs to be searched!” Ryan Brown’s mother stabbed the air with her finger when she yelled.

“Fingerprint everyone,” yelled Fleur’s father, a dentist with the unfortunate name of Dr Shott.

Investigator Riveaux, Detective Grogan, and Sergeant Decker stood nearby in a circle, talking quietly in a sweaty circle. I felt Grogan’s big eyes all over me. I moved closer. They were discussing similarities about the cafeteria fire and east wing fire. I didn’t need to hide myself as I eavesdropped. Catholic Sisters were invisible. Even me, Sister Freakshow.

“In the cafeteria” – Riveaux straightened her back – “we got that cigarette butt.”

“Same kind as in the east wing?” asked Sergeant Decker.

“Same brand. We also got the remains of clothing tied into a knot in the east wing.”
It was PRINCE tobacco they had found. It was one of the finer tobacco brands that I had had the good fortune to confiscate. Imported from Denmark, PRINCE cigarettes were procured online and sold in signature cartons of ten red packs. I knew of only one student who smoked them. For someone so poor, Prince Dempsey had expensive taste in tobacco. I had snatched at least two packs from the little prick that month alone.

New Orleans was no stranger to crime. Not by a long shot. But arson was relatively rare. “Fewer than fifty arson cases last year,” Riveaux told Decker. Most of them car fires, dumpster fires, and tyre fires. At Saint Sebastian’s, there were two fires and two deaths in less than three days.

“How far along in the interviews are we?” Grogan asked. “How many statements?”

“Halfway done. A hundred and thirty or so.”

“Half? One week in and only half? Come on. Pedal to the metal, ladies.”

“School was closed. Parents don’t want to bring kids back here or down to the station. They’re really spooked.”

“Apply pressure and get it done, Riveaux.” Grogan spat onto the kerb.

“The only red flag was from Shelley, the receptionist.”

“She is chipper, ain’t she?”

“The chippest. She said $100 in cash went missing from the school’s miscellaneous fund last year.”

“Petty cash for school supplies and all that.”
“Yeah. Odds and ends. The receptionist said it was unusual. First and only time money ever went missing. They keep a tight ship otherwise.”

“$100 can’t get you too far, and it was last year. But make a note of it and follow it up.” Grogan walked away swiftly.

Riveaux turned and noticed me standing there. “Were you there the whole time?”

“Yep.”

She eyed me up and down, wiped sweat away from her forehead. “What do you want?”

“Jack is dead. Sister Therese was murdered – pushed down the steps.”

“We don’t know if she was pushed. Homicide is investigating.”

“What do you know?”

“What do you know?” Riveaux mimicked me with an edge in her voice. “Sister Goldie, Private Eye.” She tapped her canine tooth.

Sergeant Decker and Detective Grogan finished their private conversation and faced me. Grogan’s tall, lean build and her round frame made them look like the number 10 when they stood side by side.

“How’s Lamont?” I asked.

“On his way to camp.” Grogan wiped sweat from the bridge of his nose. “Broken ankle but he’ll be alright. And, Sister, what makes you so sure it’s Prince?” Grogan asked. “We’ve questioned him,” he looked over both shoulders and lowered his muscular body so our heads were on the same level, “I shouldn’t tell you, but seeing as you are a Sister of the Sublime Blood, an Order of true faith, I can trust you. Prince Dempsey has no motive, and he has an alibi.”
“Alleged alibi.”

He chuckled. “You’re in over your head.”

“What is this alibi?” I asked. “Was it corroborated?”

“Leave us to worry about that.”

“Sister T would not have fallen. She was up and down that staircase twenty times a day.”

“She was elderly. Falling – God bless our elders’ hearts – happens all the time.”

“She was old but she was a tough broad – a doula with the Prison Birth Centre. She could bench-press more than you, I bet.”

“If she smelled smoke and ran, she probably tripped.”

“No. She was thrown down the steps, and Prince is the only one who’s previously set fires. He defaced the memorial shrine. He returned to the scene of the crime.”

“You’ve seen him trying to get inside the east wing?”

“Bernard saw him slip past the police tape.”

“He was surely mistaken, Sister Holiday.” Grogan smiled. “No one gets past my men.”

Decker cleared her throat.

“Or my ladies. Thanks for your time. Keep us informed of what you see and hear.”

Grogan and Decker strode away, in the direction of an officer who waved from an idling police car on Prytania Street.

“Homicide will crack it,” Riveaux said. “Those two are maniacs.” With her hands on her lower back, she said, “If Grogan trusts you, I guess I can too.”
“But can I trust you?”

“Sister, please.” She cleared her throat, showed me an evidence log on her phone. The text was small. “Evidence number twenty-one, right here,” she said. “We’ve got a firebug on our hands.”

“You say that word a lot.”

“Do I?”

“Yep. Why are you confiding in a civilian?”

“You’re not a civilian. Aren’t nuns bound by confidentiality? Brides of Christ and all that?”

“We’re not priests, obviously, but Sister Augustine and Sister T minister to the women of the Prison Birth Centre. They treat mentorship as confession, with the same honour code as a confessional. Trust is sacred. I do the same. I will keep anything you say absolutely confidential.”

“Okay.”

“Unless there’s a crime. Then I will report it.”

She laughed. “If you help me, I will help you. Tag along once or twice, but that’s it. Then you tell me what you hear and see. I need someone on the inside at Saint Sebastian’s.”

“I’m still an outsider, believe me. Haven’t taken permanent vows yet.”

“You wanna know what I know or not?”

“Shoot.”

“We’ve got intentional fires in the school’s east wing and cafeteria. We got a burned black blouse. Yours. We got a black V-shaped pattern on the east wing’s second
floor. We’ve got ignition fluid in the cafeteria. Your guitar pick on Sister Therese’s body. We’ve also got two PRINCE cigarette butts. One near the stoop, which is yours, and one used to ignite the fire in the east wing. So at the moment, evidence points to you, Sister Goldie.”

“What about the student statements? Anything useful?”

“Nada. Most were home as the east fires was set, apart from Jamie and Lamont. The kids getting ready for the masquerade ball didn’t see anything.”

“How exactly did the fire start in the east wing?”

“A match burned down and ignited a gasoline-soaked newspaper. Didn’t take more than a minute for that one ball of fire to catch in the corner of the classroom and spread,” Riveaux explained. “The whole second floor – gone. Ductwork letting the fire run wild. The job was clean. Extremely precise. Someone practiced this – rehearsed this – very well. There wasn’t one error. Or, they really did their research.”

*It happened so fast,* Lamont had cried during the fire. His voice itched my ears.

“Prince is too messy and too impatient to pull this off. Unless he had help. Rosemary is OCD, and a scientist. Maybe she understood how the ductwork would impact the fire. But why would Rosemary Flynn help Prince set fires?”


“Round two – Shorty, no. I’m on my way. No, stay there, damn you.” Riveaux sprinted away like a quarter horse, her head and spine straight, sweat marks along her back.

Riveaux was strong but her mind was somewhere outside of her body.
Again I felt eyes hanging on me. In my peripheral vision I detected something crooked. Prince Dempsey talked to BonTon as they approached, a lit cigarette between his teeth. He smiled, strolled casually between the gaggle of teachers, and exhaled a grey cloud into Sister Augustine’s face.

She grimaced, then smiled, and raised her clipboard to him like a shield. “Mr Dempsey, must you? There’s no smoking on school grounds.”

Light coming through the jade leaves created a lace of shadows.

I could smell smoke on Prince. Not cigarette smoke. I could have sworn it was the stench of toxic building smoke in his oily blonde hair.

“Mr Dempsey,” Sister Honour snapped, “there were two murders here, and we are grieving. Where is your decency?” She raised her thick arms to the sky. “Where is the respect in this generation? Lord, have mercy on us all!”

Sisters Lourdes and Augustine, Rosemary Flynn, and John Vander Kitt seemed to stare at me, too. Bernard ambled closer and nodded to Riveaux, his dark left eyebrow lifted in a dramatic upside-down V. He wiped his nose and squinted. He seemed transfixed by Riveaux and her movements.

“BonTon sure is pretty,” Bernard said to Prince, who stood exhaling big puffs of smoke next to a No Smoking sign. “Can I pet her?” He reached his hand out.

“No, brah!” he snapped, and Bernard winced. “She’ll bite your hand off clean at the wrist.”

“Shit. Okay. Sorry.”

“I’m playing witcha, dawg.” He grinned. “Sure, you can pet her. BonTon is a marshmallow.” Prince patted her head twice. “See? Bonnie is a gumdrop.” Prince put the
tip of his hooked nose against BonTon’s pink nose. Then he dangled a rosary over her short ears, causing her to nip at it. A game they regularly played, no doubt. A few of the white beads were burnt.

“Nice rosary.” I leaned closer to Prince. “Where did you steal it from?” I wanted to smell him, his hair and clothes and skin. I wanted to smell him for accelerant. I needed evidence. Closer still, I inhaled deeply. All I could smell was cigarette smoke, sweat, and body odour. His greasy hair held a funk so potent my eyes watered.

He backed away then stopped with a shock, as if he touched an electric fence. “Sister Augustine gifted it to me,” he said, “because she cares about me. She’s a good teacher, unlike the rest of y’all.” Prince moved close to me and stared at the crucifix around my neck. “I like that. I’m going to get one of them. Big-ass crucifix. Christ is saying ‘I’m still here, bitches. Can’t beat me. Look at me!’” He spat as he talked. “Yeah. I’m gonna get a big old cross and wear it every day.”

“You should. Would be good for you.”

“Wearing some half-naked dude around my neck. All bloody and shit. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” He put his fat finger on my crucifix. I jumped back.

“Why is that?” I coughed. Whenever I felt whole, a convulsion seized me, as if I was being strangled from the inside out. Ghosts of fire and smoke.

“I know what you are,” he whispered as he took the rosary off BonTon and put it in his pocket.

“And I, Mr Dempsey, know what you are. There is hope for redemption,” I said, “but only if you want it badly enough.” My left eye twitched.

He flipped open the top of his Zippo lighter then shut it. “Where’s your proof?”
“If you think I’m going to roll over on this, you’re wrong. I will figure this out, and when I do, I’m going to bury you.”

Prince smiled and flicked his cigarette into First Street. I flinched as its heat passed my ear. “Close call.” He laughed. “Be careful.” He tugged BonTon’s rope leash and hummed to himself as they walked near the sidewalk shrine for Jack and Sister Therese.


Prince blew out all the votive candles at Jack’s and Sister Therese’s shrine. He gave pearly white BonTon a nod and they strutted away. I stood up on my tiptoes to feel taller, but my body shook. Two police cars glided in front of the school, parked, and idled. Sergeant Decker and Detective Grogan stared at me. How did Prince get in and out of the cafeteria, in and out of the east wing, without being seen? If I could just focus, I could figure it out. I needed John and Bernard to help me.

Prince’s migraines, blurred vision, and raging fits were weekly happenings at Saint Sebastian’s, but our administrators were eager to keep him. He was one of our three scholarship students and a serious diabetic. But he was a bully and never had to take responsibility. He’d been expelled from two charter schools for flipping desks and beating up gay kids. The previous year Prince had beaten a sophomore student with a cafeteria tray. Said he had “low blood sugar.” Then changed his story and said the boy “made a move on him.” Then he changed his story a third time to “it was self-defence.”
If Prince did something worthy of expulsion, we were instructed to be patient and bring him back into the moment. Check his blood sugar. Pray. Though he had a temper like a runaway train, Prince Dempsey was a good story for the school. Expelling him would set a bad example for one of the few Catholic schools left in the city. The fundraising committee needed good stories. Maybe it was Sister Honour’s game. Putting Prince Dempsey in my class to distract me. She thought I was a loose cannon, terrible, easy to tempt. She was right.
On the decrepit TV in the teachers’ lounge on Wednesday after school, John Vander Kitt and I watched Sergeant Decker and Detective Grogan deliver a brief press conference on the investigation into Sister Therese’s death. They stood in the drab lobby of the busy New Orleans Police Department as photographers clicked away with large cameras.

“This is a tragedy,” said Grogan, his thick Louisiana accent extra ropey in the microphone. “It appears to be an accident. An autopsy was conducted today, and the report by the coroner indicates no foul play. Sister Therese, beloved teacher and Sister of the Sublime Blood, fell down the steps, and the impact of that fall caused her neck to break, resulting in death.” He smoothed his thick blonde hair back and showed a 3-D video of a CGI figure falling own the steps. “God bless,” he whispered as he stared into the camera.

“What a joke.” I turned off the TV and shook my head, sweat soaking through my black blouse. I imagined my Tree of Life tattoo crying from every inky leaf. “Lord have mercy on Sister Therese’s soul.” I closed my eyes and imagined her smiling face and warm eyes.

“If Sister Therese was not pushed,” John said as he pushed his glasses up his nose, “that should make us feel safer. It was a sad accident, not murder.”

“She was thrown down those steps. I’m telling you. She was nearly seventy-five but Sister T was one tough mother.” I stopped myself from cursing.
“Do you think Prince Dempsey could have done it? Sister Honour said that Sergeant Decker said he had an alibi.”

“A wafer-thin alibi, I’m sure.”

“Sister Honour said that Decker said that Prince said he was volunteering at the animal shelter.”

I shook my head. “I don’t believe it for a second. He knows the school’s entrances and exits. He probably stole the key, or he followed Jack inside.”

“Other students could have done it. What if Lamont and Jamie did it?

“I swore a guy was running away in the east wing as I was searching for Lamont and Jamie.”

“Poor Sister Therese, that beautiful, gentle soul.”

“I’m sure of it – she was forced down the steps. The violence of it. Her front teeth were broken. Her legs and ankles were contorted.”

“We should trust the cops. They know what they’re doing.”

“Lord, give me strength.” I gathered my papers into my bag and ran outside into the balm, leaving John muttering to himself, sipping his hot coffee in the hot air.

Investigator Riveaux’s shitty red pickup truck was parked in front of the school. She was filling out paperwork in the driver’s seat when I opened the passenger door. As I slipped into the stuffy car, I had to move an array of perfume bottles from the seat. When I sat, I realised my red guitar pick, the one I always kept in my back-right pocket, wasn’t there. I looked in my front pockets and bag. Nothing. It was probably in my bedroom.

“What do you want, Sister?” she asked, without looking up. Sweat dripped from her chin.
“Get me back in there,” I said.

“Back where?”

“The east wing. The cafeteria. To go over the evidence.”

The car was running, the air conditioner dial turned on high. But only hot air piped through the vent. Riveaux reeked of sweet, a pungent body odour and citrus deodorant that obviously didn’t work. Like rum and rotting lemons. Maybe it was one of her foul, homebrewed perfumes.

“That’s distracting.” She pointed her pen towards my left knee which bounced uncontrollably. “Try meditating. Or aroma therapy. My new lavender-vanilla perfume will make you feel five years younger.” She held up a small blue vile with no label.

“I will. After we nail the arsonist.”

The heat was solid. Invisible but thick, like a chorus of ghosts. Riveaux put the vile of perfume down and wiped sweat away from her cheek with the back of her hand.

“You’re on a mission.”

“Damn right.”

“That hurt?” She pointed to my neck tattoo – my white bird, a fledgling dove – exposed since I had removed my scarf to use it as a sweat rag.

“Yes. That’s why I did it.” I tied my scarf, fluffing it up to my chin so it covered my dove and Eve tattoo.

“A white dove doesn’t seem like your spirit animal. You’re more of a unicorn meets pit bull. A creature that is hard to explain and—”

“Impossible to forget.” I flashed a gold-toothed smile.
She rolled her eyes. “You can only walk with me if you answer more questions,” she said as we exited the truck. She left her keys in the ignition. The old red Chevy was garbage on wheels, but to leave your keys in the ignition of a city-issued pickup seemed far too trusting. “Convenient that you were at both fires exactly as they started.”

“I live here and work here. With lots of other people. Including two co-workers – friends – who have been murdered.”

“Keep your mouth shut and follow me,” she said. “Put these on. Tight.”

We slipped on blue paper booties over our shoes to prevent leaving new footprints or disturbing the crime scene. I bent under the yellow police tape in front of the east wing entrance. Riveaux stepped over the tape. Right leg then left, holding her lower back as she stepped. She opened the heavy main door with a master key, and I followed her in.

We slowly ascended the stairwell where I saw Jack’s dead body. With each step, the more poisonous the air became. Through it all, I smelled Riveaux as she walked in front of me, her sweet lemon sherbet scent of decay. Heat had melted the blades of the hallway ceiling fan. The blades all pointed down like a drying sunflower. The bulb had shattered.

Though we about were the same height – five foot five, same build – Riveaux seemed taller. She marched with her shoulders lifted, back straight.

The second floor of the east wing was carnage. Every shade of darkness, from charcoal to slate to obsidian tar. The wall had flaked off in layers, bubbled like sunburnt skin. Insulation spilled out of the wall.

“Nasty fire, this one. Y’all’s rickety ductwork helped it spread so fast.” She pointed up to the exposed vent.
We walked into Sister Lourdes’s old religion classroom, unoccupied for more than ten years according to John Vander Kitt. Every year Saint Sebastian’s enrolment dropped, and many classrooms were empty. “What’s that?” I pointed to the air-conditioning unit in the window.

“What should I be looking at?” She slid a soggy book off a shelf. Brown water splashed onto the burnt floor. I moved closer to the window to see if I could lift it. “Don’t touch anything.”

“Sorry.”

“Observe without touching. Grogan and Decker will tar and feather me if you move anything. We’ve photographed each exhibit three times for the DA, and taken long shots. They need it all for trial. For context. Believe me, Grogan will know if you as much as breathe on the wall. He notices everything. That man has lasers for eyes.”

“Look.” I pointed to the chipped paint. “The air conditioner. It was moved.”

“It was moved.” Riveaux nodded. “Good catch.”

“These units are permanent, all year round. They’ve never been moved in my three years here.”

“You can see from this pattern here.” She knelt down and inspected where the air conditioner had scraped paint off the windowsill. “That must be how the firebug got in and out without a key and without breaking a window. They used the fire escape to and from the street. Needs to be someone strong enough to lift it.” Riveaux tightened her ponytail and narrowed her eyes, which were a shade of brown that looked purple in the sun behind her thick-framed glasses.
“No. That’s how Jamie and Lamont got in and out. I don’t think that’s how the arsonist snuck out. Too obvious. Red herring.”

“What on earth do you know about red herrings?”

“The yarns I had to spin when I was closeted.”

“Closeted?”

“Long story.”

“Sign me up for story hour then. Look, the biggest burn pattern is right here.” She pointed her bony finger to the floor. “We found remnants of a match and a PRINCE cigarette butt near a bundle of clothes soaked in gas.”

“Definitely intentional. You show up to every fire?”

“Yeah. The FD calls in yours truly, whether there is a suspicious element or not, so the DA can build a case from the ground up.” She stepped carefully, trying to avoiding piles of debris. She tightened her left blue bootie which had started to fall off. “See here? This is where flashover started.”

“What is flashover?”

“From having a fire in a building to having a building on fire. When the gases hit the ceiling, they flare out. Nowhere to go but down.”

The classroom window frames were splintered and there were glass shards everywhere, like the building had been bombed. Other light bulbs had been deformed without breaking.

I peeled off one glove, slid my soggy right hand in my pocket. The air was sweltering.

“Put that glove back on. Don’t touch anything.”
“Okay, okay.” Right glove back on. “How did you know it was arson so fast the night of the east wing fire? Don’t you guys get it wrong?”

“Crime scene investigation has change fire science, I can tell you that.”

Riveaux recited key milestones from fire science history, comparing them to milestones in her own perfume-making practice. I knelt on the ashy ground and examined the ground. A clue or evidence had to be hiding. That room was a point of origin. Maybe something was stashed there before the fire and there was no time to retrieve it. Some clue that could link Prince to the scene and the moment of arson. But there was nothing.

I heard Riveaux crack her back. I stood quickly.

“Fire, like everything else, has a story. You have to listen to it. Take your time. Ask the fire questions. Then ask more. Follow it like it’s a person with something to hide. Watch its behaviour. How it smells gives you clues. What it sounds like gives you clues. How it moves.”

“Sounds like you are describing a first date.”

“Wish that were as interesting as my first date with my husband, er, ex-husband.”

“Screw ’em. Love is a distraction anyway.”

“That why you became a nun?”

“It’s an extra benefit. God is real for me, whether you believe it or not.”

“Look.” She pointed to the corner where fire had devoured the bookcase. “What fire takes can tell you as much as what it leaves behind. And, smell that.”

“It’s revolting.”

“That’s a particular scent of acrid. Like decaying flesh. Probably from the burned insulation. I’m working on my nose.”
“What?”

“My perfuming skills. Perfumers are also called ‘noses.’”

“Riveting.”

It was so sour inside the burned wing I had to stop myself from gagging. The rot had a burnt note but with a sickly sweet undertone. Like the green infection sliding down the back of your throat. It had been more than a week since the fires, but the smoke was still alive. I could still feel that flying ember in my eye.

“Textbook arson,” Riveaux muttered, more to herself than to me. “Though I don’t know why I’m telling you any of this at all.”

“You can trust me.”

“First rule of law enforcement and fire investigation: trust the evidence. It’s like in perfuming and botanicals. Take calendula, for example, it’s—”

I cut her off. “If there is no question that both fires are arson, and we know Prince Dempsey has set fires in the past, why is the investigation taking so long?”

“Bigger picture, Sister.” She sighed and shook her head. “What’s Prince’s motive?”

“Control. One school, two fires. Look at the common thread. He wants us all to pay attention to him, to play his little game because he’s had an out-of-control shit life.”

“How do you know the ‘common thread’?”

“My queerness shows me subtext the way a black light shows blood and piss stains in a motel room.”
“Charming.” Her sweating intensified, like a pipe had burst in each temple. “Even if this kid wants control, that’s emotional. Emotions are not a motive,” was her annoying reply. “Think insurance fraud. Think pyromania. Think revenge.”

“Prince is a bully. Like his pit bull but without a leash. He gets off on tormenting the students. He was pissing on the candle shrine. He’s already lit fires and he told me he’ll finish the job next time, do it right. Why can’t you see? Did anyone corroborate his animal shelter alibi on Sunday night. What is Detective Grogan doing?”

“Grogan is smart and obsessed, which is good. He is also a by-the-book, old school detective. It takes time. You shouldn’t even be in here.”

“You let me in. I need to make sense of this.”

“Don’t waste your time trying to make any kind of sense.”

“Time is the only thing I have.”
Thursday morning was quiet. More panicked moms and dads were not allowing their kids back to school. The upside was that my usually rowdy class was manageable. Sister Augustine tried to reassure worried parents by asking an officer to patrol the school when classes were in session. The NOPD was lean, diminished by budget cuts like everything else in the city, but Detective Grogan and Sergeant Decker made the case that we needed protection.

After the class bell, students clipped their guitar cases shut and slung backpacks over their shoulders. They moved through the door slowly, in a cluster. My reflection in Arjune’s shiny bike helmet shocked me.

“You need fire extinguishers in every room and every stairwell,” Officer Ben Hayden, on patrol that day, told Sister Augustine. They were locked in an intense conversation in the hallway, outside my classroom door.

The police were also searching lockers. A tedious process, surely, but I doubted if they could be any slower. If I had access to the case files, I’d have blown the case open. I needed to dig through student bags somehow. The kids were too smart to leave anything incriminating in their lockers. I needed hard evidence – something conclusive on Prince – or whoever was behind it, if it wasn’t him – for Riveaux and Grogan to believe me. I had collected a tall stack of papers from my desk – my office – when I heard Rosemary Flynn discussing an exam grade with a student at the other end of our shared classroom.

“Ms Flynn,” I said, “lock up when you’re done.”

“Some people say ‘please’,” she protested. “Some even dare to say ‘thank you’.”
“Lock up when you’re done.”

I raced out of the classroom into the loud hall, weaving between slow-moving groups of texting students.

I turned left towards Sister Augustine’s office. I had planned to ask her for permission to read Prince’s school files. Since Prince had enrolled at Saint Sebastian’s, Sister Augustine had instructed me to “give Prince latitude,” but ignoring him made me bristle. It was also against the law to ignore him since he taunted students with his lighter, had burned Rebecca’s hair, and had threatened to burn our school down the same day the school was in flames. I was a mandated reporter, legally required to ensure a report is made if abuse was observed or suspected.

Sister Augustine’s voice on the intercom announced another impromptu faculty assembly at 1 p.m. that Wednesday. I had resented the interrogations, police presence, cancelled classes, early dismissals, shared classrooms, student whispers, and meetings with the homicide detectives, especially Grogan, whose syrupy kindness was out of place. Before the arson rewrote my rhythms, I worked hard to accept my daily patterns as a Sister of the Sublime Blood. Mass, meals, teaching, praying, sleeping. Repeat. It took three years, but I grew to appreciate the sameness. Purity of ritual. I wanted it back.

Finally my work mattered. I found Investigator Riveaux’s weirdness refreshing, but she gave a new meaning to the word slow. Two dead bodies, two fires, and no suspects. Pitiful. I should be in charge. Or Sister Augustine. Even Sister Honour could do a better job than the cops, with her insufferable stubbornness.
“Is Sister Augustine back yet?” I asked Shelly, the receptionist, a terminally joyful pinprick of a woman whose brownies were secretly lusted after by most Sisters of the Sublime Blood.

“I’m sorry. She was back for a quick minute then stepped out again. The Lord’s work is never done.” Her toothy smile made me nauseous.

The phone rang and she sprinted to her desk. “Oh. Phone again. Ringing off the hook since the fires. Parents are all colours of upset. Excuse me – ‘Saint Sebastian’s principal’s office, Shelly speaking. How might I help y’all this morning?’” She put her hand over the phone receiver and lifted her chin to me, “Sister Holiday, why don’t you come back in an hour, okay? She should be back then.”

I nodded, but as Shelly turned from me and rifled through the outgoing mailbox, I backed up, placed my black-gloved right hand on the doorknob of Sister Augustine’s office. I walked in, but instead of white-haired Sister Augustine at her desk, it was Investigator Maggie Riveaux who sat in her swivel chair.

“I was a miserable failure of a student.” She lifted her legs and rested her feet on the desk. Her shoes were scuffed black leather. She slid her thumbs behind her soaring-eagle belt buckle.

“I’m not surprised.”

“Because I’m black and you’re a racist?”

“Because smart people get bored easily.”

“Right.” She smiled and her violet eyes perked up. She swivelled away from me to look out the window behind Sister Augustine’s desk. “‘You’re too serious, Maggie,’ my folks always told me. ‘Mags, you think too much. You read too much, Mags. Get out
of that head of yours. You need to get out there on the bicycle and—’. I got detention
every other day. Jesus, I was— Er, sorry.”

“Curse. It makes me feel normal.”

“You’re not like the rest of the Order, are you?” Investigator Riveaux tapped her
left canine to signal my gold tooth.

My gold tooth was my calling card, as absurd and different as I wanted to be in
my old life. Before the light. Why was anyone surprised when I found myself on the
mocha love seat of the back room in KK’s Brooklyn pharmacy that, on Tuesday and
Thursday night, doubled as a dentistry clinic for the uninsured?

I recall Audrey as she thumbed through the pamphlet of gold-cap dental
possibilities. “Ooh. This one. Pretty.” She flipped the page around and pointed something
out to me. I didn’t notice because I was engaged with my compact mirror. Reapplying
mascara. Bloody gauze spilled out of my mouth, but my eye make-up still looked damn
good. I missed make-up as a Sister. Not as much as I missed sex.

“You’re, like, my hero, for fighting that guy,” murmured Audrey. She reached
over the arm of the love seat that had most likely been there since KK’s father opened the
pharmacy/clandestine dental clinic in 1982. She kissed me softly on the mouth. Her lips
tasted like sweet trouble, like a whisky and coke.

“What day is it?” I remember touching my sore jaw. The deep, raw pain.

“Days are arbitrary,” Audrey said. “Calendar-makers invented day names to keep
us addicted to buying calendars.”

“You know everything.” I put my hand on her thigh and kissed her.

“I know that I love my best friend and my warrior princess, Holiday Walsh.”
“Don’t do that.”

“What?” she asked.

“Call me your best friend.”

“But you are, and more.”

“I can’t remember what day it is. My little grey cells have been drowned in Patrón.”

Audrey leaned over and touched my bruised lip. “Super sleuth.”

I put my head on her shoulder, breathed in her sandalwood perfume as I kissed her neck. Her skin was soft and warm.

“Whatever day it is,” I said with my head next to hers, “we won today, didn’t we?”

“We did win today,” she said. “We get more exciting with age.”

“Like an unpaid parking ticket.”

“Like a fine wine.” Audrey wrapped her hands around mine, her fierce gold manicure a strong contrast to my black leather trousers and KK’s drab sofa.

Though it hurt my face, I smiled at Audrey. Wild, dazzling Audrey who I had not laid eyes on in more three years.

My school pal KK – pharmacist by day, dentist by night – gave me the gold tooth.

“You’re fucking kidding me.” He didn’t hide his irritation at my presence in his office that night. He rubbed his eyes underneath his heavy black-framed smudged glasses. His glasses covered most of his face.

“Gold tonight, buddy. Then we’re square. Promise.”

“Follow me.”
I stood up, grunted as I eased off my cracked leather jacket and handed it to Audrey. KK was as slender and pallid as the white folder he carried under his arm. The pharmacy was quiet. Officially closed after 7 p.m. Peppered on the shelves of ordinary toothpaste, first-aid ointments, and hair conditioners were some brightly coloured products that KK sold for the regular Polish patrons of that Brooklyn neighbourhood. Only a trusted, core group knew the exact details of KK’s after-hours side of the business as a moonlighting dentist: gold teeth for cash or gold teeth for other permutations of gold.

KK’s family had a loyal following in the neighbourhood. Even if the police knew about his lack of permits and accredited medical training (which they probably did), it would be a hard slog to shut him down because the cops probably owed him favours.

I trekked into his “clean room” and sat in the motorised chair. I felt strangely calm. My head was light from the cops’ rough up and the drug of vengeance. It was the solvency that grabbed me, though. I had stopped the linebacker, if even for a moment. My punch was one drop of water to extinguish an endless brushfire of misogyny. Almost holy.

“Open,” said KK softly, ever the professional. Even when he was twelve years old, KK exuded sensibility. Old-school Brooklyn. “Ahh. Good. Breathe.” He clicked a button on a slim remote that turned on light muzak – a panpipe version of Michael Jackson’s “Beat It.”

I remember tilting my head back and opening wide. KK was the only man I would allow to put anything in my mouth. He didn’t care enough to want to fuck me or fuck with me. That made him safe.

As KK adjusted the curved halogen dentist light above me, I shut my eyes tight.
Light pounded my eyelids. Like thumbs of sun pressing down, energy seeped through my skin, singing something new into me. Absolution. A portent of my future self. As he leaned over me, I felt the vibration of the dental equipment. It was like getting a tattoo but far more painful.

That memory, like so many, was equal parts bitter and sweet.

“Have something to confess?” Riveaux tilted her head and tapped on the desk to get my attention. “You’re in another world.”

“Just praying.”

“Sister Augustine is bringing staff in soon for more interviews. Lockers are being searched. Decker and Grogan will be back to take statements. I’m saving you time by asking you to leave.”

“But you’re still looking at Prince?” A small bolt of guilt stung me. Prince was eighteen. An adult in the eyes of Louisiana law. But he still was a kid. Wounded and lost, like the rest of us. Everyone has a shot at redemption, right? God offers penance for anyone who truly seeks it in their heart.

“I’m looking at everything, Goldie.” She tapped her canine tooth again. “All students, staff, teachers. What do you know about Rosemary Flynn?”

“Besides her OCD? Not much.”

“Watch her and see what you discover. What about Bernard Gregory? He had access.”

“Bernard had the most access to the school. He was the first on the scene of the cafeteria fire. Too obvious. He found my shirt and told us right away. That leads me to deduce that it wasn’t Bernard.”
Spending a decade trying to decipher who and was not queer afforded me sharper-than-average elimination skills. Plus, I liked Bernard. I trusted myself above anyone else. Except God.

Suddenly Riveaux’s radio chimed to life. “Fourteen Renaissance Village.” The radio voice was deep and sing-songy.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Shhh!” said Riveaux. “Copy. 242, now?”

“Copy that,” said the radio voice.

“Over.” She raised her eyes from her radio to me. “That’s Dempsey’s last-known address, a FEMA trailer in a trailer park in Metairie. Prince was flagged by the police even before the first fire. Our guys are heading there now. There’s a warrant out for his arrest.” She jumped up then straightened her back.

“For what?”

“Vandalism. The cathedral downtown was tagged last month. He somehow managed to crack open two of the oldest tombs in the city.”

“Bastard.”

“You curse more than I do.”

“If the warrant is live, why hasn’t Prince been picked up already?” I followed as she walked outside.

“Just issued. Too much crime, not enough cops. We’re going to execute this warrant now.”

She moved swiftly to her red pickup, the keys still in the ignition for some reason. I slipped into the roasting vehicle. “I’m going with you.”
“Like hell you are,” Riveaux said, as a trail of sweat rolled from her left eyebrow. She wiggled in her seat again, knocking a perfume bottle to the floor. “Amen. Namaste. Goodbye.”

Riveaux was a pond of sweat behind the wheel. An old laptop was suspended on a mount above the truck’s gear shift and two radios.

“You need me,” I said. “I can ID Prince. He skipped school today. He could be anywhere.” I buckled the seatbelt around my waist, the metal of the buckle lightning hot.

“I’ll identify him. Got his picture here.” She held up a photo but the Prince in her picture looked calm. Soft kindness in his blue eyes.

“That picture is about four years old. He has a scar on his face now. He looks different. Let me come. I can ID him.”

“You want to see your boy’s reaction when we take him down.”

“Maybe.”

“Are all Sisters this spiteful?” Riveaux turned the key and the truck purred to life with a loud rev.

“Not spiteful,” I said. “Thorough.”

“You won’t leave me the hell alone, will you?”

I shook my head.

She tightened her long ponytail, pulling the skin of her temples and broad forehead. “Fine.”

The car’s hazy heat made me panic. I readjusted my seatbelt and looked at myself in the flip-down mirror. Any chance I could get, I stole a moment with the mirror. And
the stranger on the other side. My white dove tattoo peeked above my scarf. Was one part of me always trying to escape?

“Buckled?”

“Let’s go.”

“What the hell am I doing?” she muttered. “I’m going to log this shit as a ‘ride-along’. Say you’re baptising me.”

“I’ll make you a saint if you drive fast. Let’s go!”

“You sure you can handle this?”

“I’m no candy-ass. Go.”

Riveaux laughed as I lowered our windows. The air conditioner was on full blast but wasn’t producing cold air. It was a wind tunnel of hot air like a hairdryer. A cough tickled the back of my throat. I kept it contained. The truck smelled like fake vanilla and gasoline.

I sniffed the air. “Why do you smell like gas?” I asked.

“Because I filled up the truck today.”

“Oh.”

“Three weeks before the fire at Saint Sebastian’s, CCTV surveillance footage showed Prince Dempsey throwing a pint of red paint on the door of the historic Vieux Carré Cathedral. Then he spray-painted ‘YOUR BEAUTIFUL’ on the side of the building. ‘Y-O-U-R.’”

“The idiot can’t even spell.” I scowled. “He’s clever. But not about everything.”

“I think it’s intentionally ironic, an artistic comment on how dissent and not following orders is a kind of radical beautification.” Riveaux’s sweat swirled into the dip
of her collarbone. With her hair pulled back and her high cheekbones, she reminded me of a far nerdier version of Sade. Despite her sorry excuse for fashion, sitting behind the wheel, Riveaux possessed an effortless beauty that distracted me.

“You teach Prince Dempsey for an hour and see how radically beautifying it is.”

“Don’t let hate cloud your judgement. Can’t get emotional on the job.”

Riveaux was driving in the middle of the road. She was bobbing and weaving from lane to hard shoulder. At 70 mph, we joined a cluster of NOPD cars with their sirens blaring. All the other cars had pulled to the side of the road to let us pass. The blue sky was electric.

As we arrived in Prince’s trailer park in Metairie, the motorcade slowed, looking for his unit. The number 14 was barely visible in the weeds that grew so high they curled in front of the doorframe. Finally, the car ahead radioed and the dispatcher confirmed. They’d found the trailer. As we were parking in front of his trailer, Prince had jumped into a jeep and sped off.

The grainy NOPD radio played the second by second details as the deputies attempted to pull him over. Riveaux and I were a few beats behind in the steamy truck. But Prince, who was behind the wheel of the jeep, forced the NOPD into a nineteen-mile chase that ended up downtown, along Tchoupitoulas and Napoleon and up Religious Street, which I was sure meant that we were about to die.

*Holy Mary, Mother of God.*

With Riveaux’s siren blaring, we drove at 66 mph. Then 71.

A feral cat scurried up a dry palm tree. Shards of bark flew off. I felt like I could fly right through the windscreen.
Then 72 mph, then 74. Then zero. Then she floored it again.

_Holy Mary, our life, our sweetness, and our hope. Holy Mary._

Each hairpin turn dished out a centrifugal force so strong it pushed me against the passenger door. I would have double-checked that it was locked except that I was stuck. My seatbelt was cutting into my neck. Riveaux stopped abruptly, then tailgated someone and sped up to 70 mph. Then she dropped back to 20 mph.

“Trailer park, you said?”

“Yep.”

“If I didn’t hate Prince Dempsey so much, I’d feel bad for him.”

Riveaux shook her head. “Nuns aren’t supposed to hate.” Sweat rained down her neck as we took another hard turn.

“I’m nuanced.” Bile burned the back of my throat. “Dear Lord,” I said aloud, “keep me alive long enough to kill Investigator Riveaux for her shit driving, then resurrect us for Mardi Gras.” I kept my eyes closed, trying to push the nausea down.

She wiped sweat from under her sunglasses. “You’re the one who begged to join.”


When deputies finally forced Prince’s car to the side of Erato Street, Riveaux and I arrived right behind, her siren squealing, the truck wheels searing the pavement, scoring the asphalt with rubber tyre marks. We were both raining sweat. My fingers pruned under leather.
Detective Grogan and Sergeant Decker’s car sped into view behind Prince’s. Grogan exited, rolled up his beige sleeves, and swaggered towards Prince’s car. Through a megaphone he barked, “All passengers need to exit the vehicle.” Four of the five boys complied. Prince Dempsey with BonTon, her fur as white as fake snow, were the last ones in the car.

“Now the real danger begins,” Riveaux said with a smile, “trying to extract the dude from his car.”

Prince exhaled his cigarette smoke. His four teenage male compatriots sat along the road with their hands cuffed behind their back. One boy was shirtless. An image of the Statue of Liberty giving the middle finger was tattooed across his broad back, which was slick with sweat. On his right bicep was a tattoo of a heart with an arrow and *The Storm* in filigree cursive across it.

Two NOPD officers dragged Prince out of the vehicle. Sergeant Decker seemed to materialise out of thin air.

“Prince Dempsey, we are arresting you for resisting arrest and on an outstanding warrant for felony vandalism of the Vieux Carré Cathedral. You have the right to remain silent,” Decker chanted. “Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you.”

Prince kicked her and tried to swing a punch as she recited the Miranda warning.

“Don’t touch BonTon,” Prince snarled.

“Don’t fight, Prince,” I shouted as I crossed the street. “Submit.”

“You came for the show, huh?” Prince growled.
“Sister, that’s not helpful,” said Riveaux. “Get back in the truck.” She seemed surprised to see Grogan, who was moving closer to us. “Where’d you come from?”

“Sister, move back behind the police car,” he told me. “This is the scene of an arrest.”

“The jig is up, kid.” I screamed at Prince.

“Fuck off.” Prince spat in my face. “I like fast driving. And so do you. Y’all got lead feet.” He was standing almost too straight, with his hands cuffed behind his back. Pleased with himself. “Don’t touch her,” said Prince as the dog barked in the back seat. An officer reached in and led BonTon out onto the side of the road behind the car.

“We’ll be gentle,” an officer said. “Peters,” he said into his radio, “it’s Bennett. Call Sharon at Animal Control. Yep. Big white pitty. I ain’t touchin’ it.”

BonTon’s floppy ears flattened against her head in fear. She whimpered and blurted a single “woof” as they dragged Prince off.

“BonTon!” He screamed, and she barked again.

BonTon was a mountain of muscle, but she was devoted to her human. She was a softie with a tough exterior.

“No Animal Control.” Prince turned and opened his blue eyes wide. “No shelter, please. It will stress her out. My mom will take her. Call Sister Augustine or my mom. If you put that dog in a pound, I will cut your throat.”

“Only the fourth threat today.” Officer Bennett laughed, still holding BonTon’s leash. “Hayden, add ‘threatening an officer’ to the young mister’s charge sheet.”

“Will do.”

“I need to call my mother. She’s a whore but she’ll watch BonTon.”
“Let him call his damn mother,” Investigator Riveaux said. “I have some aroma therapy potion I can give you.”

“What the fuck?”

“To calm the dog’s nerves.”

“Give it to my mom.”

Another officer took BonTon’s leash and led her into an NOPD truck, where I could hear her squealing.

Across the street, Prince yelled into his phone at his mother. Then he shouted to me, “Hey, Sister Holiday.” He kissed the air. “Nice to see you, cunt.”

“Wanna ride the electric tiger?” I grabbed the taser from Officer Bennett’s belt, sprinted past Riveaux to Prince, and held the taser like a gun.

Prince spat in my face again, just before Riveaux grabbed my elbow. Officer Bennett led Prince into the back seat of the NOPD squad car. Bennett slammed Prince’s door, then hopped in the car. Peters rode shotgun as the three sped off.

“Merry Christmas to me,” Riveaux said. “Good thing Judge Jasper granted us our search warrant today because looky, looky.”

In Prince’s trunk was a red leash and a backpack with a Smith & Wesson M&P 9mm. My old man had one. For better or worse. “Looks like a .40 S and W,” Riveaux announced into her handset. There was also a can of red spray paint, a knife, a pack of PRINCE cigarettes, three bricks of cash, and a can of kerosene.

“That fuel can looks exactly like the one that’s in our school shed,” I said.

“Everyone with a barbeque has one of those,” Riveaux pointed out.

“Still.” I could put and two together, even if no one else could. “Inside job.”
After photographs were taken and the items in the trunk were logged, Riveaux handed the bag of money to an NOPD colleague, his face reflected in her large aviator sunglasses.

“Where’s this kid getting that kind of coin?” Riveaux asked as she looked into the trunk.

“Babysitting and paper routes,” I said.

Riveaux rolled her eyes then spoke in code into her radio. Though the codes were somewhat cryptic, from having a cop for a father, I worked out that Prince had been arrested for giving chase, resisting arrest, the outstanding vandalism charge, and possession of stolen cash and a handgun without a firearms licence.

Two officers sat sweating in their steaming NOPD cruiser. A strong smell of body odour wafted out. Riveaux popped her head in the open window of the passenger side where a man with the nameplate “Officer Smith” was counting piles of cash.

“Smitty, Dixon – how much?”

“Six thousand dollars,” Officer Smith said.

“I’m going to trace the serial numbers as soon as Smitty can get off his sorry ass and log the second count,” Officer Dixon said.

Officer Smith’s sunglasses covered most of his face. Sweat glistened on his cheeks. His chin sported a five-o’clock shadow. “Riveaux, who’s that?” he stepped out of the police car, stood, and nodded towards me. “Your intern?” He laughed and looked at Dixon, who rolled his eyes. “Why does Riveaux always get the girls? We need some girl power in our division, don’t we, Dix?”

“Class act, you are.” Officer Dixon sighed.
“That’s Sister Holiday,” Riveaux said smugly, “from Saint Sebastian’s School. She agreed to help ID Prince.”

“No way.” Officer Smith howled. “Her? A nun? She looks like the gutter dyke I arrested in the Bywater today. Bitch tried to cut me with a broken bottle.”

“Maybe the Lord should cut you.” I smiled at him.

“You shouldn’t say that. You’re a goddam nun.”

“Didn’t you just say I was a gutter dyke?” I licked my lips, tasted the salty dust and gravel kicked up from the tyres. I spat and it landed near Smith’s feet, making him jump back.

“Forget it.” Officer Smith shook his head. “I don’t know what you are, and I don’t want to know.”

“Then get out of my way.” I walked toward him and he backed up jerkily, tripping in the process, as if I were a rabid swamp rat launching at his ankle. I dashed to look again at the stash in the trunk.

“Button it, Smitty,” Riveaux said as she walked with me to the trunk. “Finish the report.”

“What happens next?”

“Prince will be booked. The arresting officers will take his details and address.” She looked me up and down. “Want to know what I think?”

“No.”

“Some part of you likes the chase, doesn’t it?”

“Naw. I want to help,” I lied. Of course I liked it. Not only the chase but the violence. Fire slithering back to life after you were sure it was extinguished. I liked
digging in the trash. The more disgusting the better. Feeling for clues in slime and filth.

Yeah, I wore a scarf and gloves to conceal my tattoos. Sister Augustine made me. But I still put my hands where no hands should go. I liked speeding through red lights.

Headfirst to the edge. Scraping enough skin to burn not bleed. It was Godly, really. The fire of vengeance. I liked the charge in the air when Prince Dempsey spat in my face, cursing blue blazes. Sleuthing was as impossible as it was consequential. Like kissing a married woman. Like a plague of locusts.

As an officer fished out his camera lens to photograph the evidence, I peered into the trunk for another moment. A whip of jealousy seized me. Three years ago, a bottle of spray paint, a knife, fresh smokes, a handgun, and a brick of money were treats I could never have resisted. If self-denial brought you closer to God, I craved a little distance.
Chapter 13

I’m the first to admit I’m shit at most things involving human interaction, but I am a brilliant music teacher. The instrument was different, but music bridged my old life and new life. It was my devotion. Music isn’t an old, dusty theory. It’s a living thing. If my students learn nothing else from me, I want them to learn that. Like most of God’s gifts, what we do with music or art or love or life is up to us to treasure. Or ruin.

Up, down, across the classroom a dozen times I spun as I showed each student – except absent Prince Dempsey – the problem and the correction so they could improve. It was the lesson I had taught myself on a daily basis. Unlike the full body rocking of the punk power-chords of my twenties, I taught finger-picking melodies in New Orleans, folk tunes, and Beatles songs to high school kids. It was still glorious noise. It satiated my primordial need to pick up an instrument and let the gospel speak through me.

Though attendance at our daily Mass services seemed to double every day, Saint Sebastian’s classes continued to shrink. More parents kept kids at home out of fear. Other students gossiped about the police, and Jack’s and Sister Therese’s deaths.

In our shared classroom, Rosemary and I avoided small talk. “Jonah, how far?” Rosemary Flynn asked one of her science students on the opposite side of the room.

“He, how far to what?” Jonah replied.

Rosemary bowed her head, and sighed. “How far is the distance between the earth and the sun? We covered this last class.”
“It’s an average distance of 90,000,000 miles,” I exclaimed from across the classroom. Students on both sides of the room turned and craned their necks in my direction.

“How did you know that?” Rosemary asked.

“It’s there on the poster you wheeled in and pinned up on my wall without asking.” I pointed. The only poster Rosemary had hung in her temporary side of the classroom showed all the planets and their distances to the sun.

“Indeed,” said Rosemary, who, in her tight black-and-white-striped cashmere sweater and white pearls reminded me of the trust-fund girls I hated back home in New York. Her strawberry-blonde hair was knotted in a bun. As I scrutinised the lift of her shoulders – was she curious or annoyed? – I stopped breathing. Like a strong hand had gripped my throat, the base of a thumb on my windpipe. My reaction confused me. I had spent so much time trying to ignore Rosemary Flynn and her body. But Jesus was sent to us in a body. During communion, the wafer transforms into Jesus’s body and blood on our tongues. Our bodies are holy. Inking my body was also holy. Like playing guitar. Sure, the needle hurt sometimes. But it should hurt. Salvation was worth it. “Pain is temporary,” Sister Augustine always said, “but God is everlasting.” Ritual acts were different ways to pray.

Rosemary pulled out an empty chair next to a student’s desk on the far side of the room. Looked like the kid needed help with a physics problem. Without her judgemental eyes on me, and with other students in a perennial comatose state, I went to investigate her desk. It wasn’t a real desk, but rather a basic folding table brought in by Bernard Gregory for ease. It was still punishingly neat and appeared to be more professional than
my desk-office. There were rulers of various sizes, compasses, spirit levels. Rosemary also had files for every senior student in crates under her desk. I knew this because Sister Augustine made me carry the heavy box of files up to the classroom, and I tried to record every detail in some small way. I flipped through the folders, skin shrivelling under my gloves, until I read PRINCE DEMPSEY on a folder tab. I wanted to study Prince’s handwriting to see what narcissism or psychosis his penmanship revealed. Reading detective novels as a kid, I had learned that handwriting analysis was like a Rorschach test. It was low tech, no doubt, but it could tease out personality traits, tendencies, abilities, habits, even criminality. For example, if a signature doesn’t match the handwriting, the person is hiding behind a persona. If a last name is crossed out, someone is planning reinvention. In my music class, there were no written quizzes or tests, and I took verbal attendance. I needed to study Prince’s writing. I opened Rosemary’s folder but there was nothing inside. Not one paper.

“What do you need?” asked Rosemary sharply when she caught sight of me at the files.

“Nothing that you can provide.”

“Sick burn,” said Arjune.

I returned to my stool and tucked my guitar into me as I played two chords. My instrument was familiar and seemed to respond to me – my embrace. An acoustic guitar was curved, alive, deceptively complex. Like a woman. Don’t get me wrong, I missed my Stratocaster. Matte-black. I missed the voltage, pedals, and effects. But my acoustic Yamaha was like a little orchestra inside of one wood instrument. Resonance, vibrato, and timbre, all in one. It’s not meant to be plugged in or amplified or fiddled with. In an
acoustic, the magic is there, baked right into the design. It’s up to the player – me – to free the spirit. Sure, the FG800 was a budget buy. It was all the school could afford. But it still laced the air with a warm tone. The Sisters worked with what we could. It was our duty. When I craved the metallic echoes of my old electric, I pressed my acoustic guitar against my chest, so tight it could break. I closed my eyes and strummed hard.”

Next to the solar bodies poster was The Big Read poster about the *Book of Judith*. The Big Read was our community reading programme. Every year a book or short text would be read by the entire school, students and faculty. We would all read the same text and then gather in a series of assemblies to discuss its relevance and debate its interpretations. The Catholic diocese offered Saint Sebastian’s a grant for The Big Read. It was one of the few funding sources we had left. More and more kids were graduating practically illiterate, but religious literacy still mattered.

To me, Judith was the quintessential riot grrrl. It was a deuterocanonical book, yes, but who could deny its legacy for feminism. Judith beheaded Holofernes to save her people. Judith was a boss.

In the staff lounge later, always a storm of papers and cups of half drunk, bitter coffee – Sister Honour’s coffee tasted like ground up crickets – teachers discussed Judith.

I stood and stretched my arms as John shared details about the *Book of Judith* with scruffy Bernard Gregory, who was sitting on the carpet repairing the drum in the ancient printer. John said, “The story is about Judith, a brave and handsome widow.”

“Single and ready to mingle.” Bernard smiled.
I nodded my head. Bernard chuckled and Sister Honour, who glowered at us, cleared her throat and sneered.

John continued: “Judith knows the opposing army wants to destroy her hometown, so she leaves with her loyal maidservant and they walk to the camp of Holofernes, the general in charge of the enemy army.”

“That takes balls,” Bernard said.

“Bernard!” Sister Honour chided.

“She is brave, though,” said John. “They approach Holofernes. He’s attracted to her. She makes him trust her. And Judith is allowed into his tent on an evening, and she feeds him wine. There he is, stewing in bed in a drunken stupor.”

“Been there once or twice.” Bernard and I again exchanged smiles.

Sister Honour squinted, observing my every movement with triumphant scorn, like she was studying a venomous spider trapped inside glass box.

“As Holofernes lay there, wildly drunk, Judith, with the help of her maid, decapitates him! Then Judith takes his decapitated head back to her fearful countrymen!”

John was giddy as he sipped from his thermos. “A trophy.”

“Prince Dempsey may very well read this text when he finds out how graphically violent it is,” Rosemary said.

“If he can actually read,” I said causing Bernard to chuckle.

“Sister Holiday!” Sister Honour sprayed saliva as she spoke. “How dare you disparage our very own student in front of other faculty.”

“You talk smack on 99.9 per cent of our students,” I hit back.

“Watch yourself.”
John continued: “The Assyrians, having lost their leader, flee Israel.” He raised his voice, almost to a shout. “Judith wins!”

“Does she win?” Rosemary sighed. “She died alone.”

“It’s true,” said John. “Though she is wooed by many a fine gentleman, who would no doubt respect her for her strength of character—”

“And body,” Bernard added.

John continued, “Judith remains unmarried for the rest of her life.”

“She was not alone.” Sister Honour made the sign of the cross. “She was attached to God, as the Sisters of the Sublime are. Married to Jesus.”

“Maybe Judith was, you know, hooking up with her maidservant?” I nodded at Bernard, who smiled wildly, like a Jack-o’-lantern. “A red-herring to throw Holofernes off her scent? Or, to brainwash her maidservant into helping her commit murder?”

Neither would shock me. I knew what queers and women had to do to survive. You have to pass. Suck it up. Suck dick. Whatever it takes. A means to an end.

“Stop!” Sister Honour charged me, backed me against the wall, and screamed in my face. “Judith was not a lesbian” – she gagged at the word. Spit flew from her thin lips. “Judith was a true believer! Judith would do anything for God!”

Her aggression took me by surprise. I lifted my chin and curled my fist.

“Anything?” I stood, cracked my gloved knuckles. Ready, wanting to fight. “Like burn a school down, for example?”

Sister Honour stood too, brought her grizzled face to mine. “Don’t you dare—”
“Dare what? Call you out, finally?” I stepped closer, so close I could smell her graveyard breath. “What were you doing on the night of the cafeteria fire? You did steal one of my blouses, didn’t you?”

“You unworthy filth!” She pushed me.

Startled, I stumbled back but quickly regained my footing. How glorious it was to feel Sister Honour lose it, lose her cool.

“Sister Augustine should never have let you in our sacred space. Poison! That’s all you are.” She ripped off my scarf, revealing my Eve and dove tattoos.

“Sister Honour,” Sister Augustine warned. “Stop.”

“She’s relentless!” Sister Honour wiped sweat from her brow.

Sister Augustine calmly placed her hand on Sister Honour’s sharp shoulder. “I know you are protective of Judith but, please, we are all on the same team here.”

“I’m not on her team.” Sister Honour sneered.

With a hand on Sister Honour’s shoulder, Sister Augustine directed her to an unoccupied chair. “We’re all on God’s team,” said our principal.

“Judith did what God asked of her,” Sister Honour said, her chin sagging. Gravity was pulling her down. She was unable to reverse it. “What God asks of us, we must do.”

“I’m gonna get a Judith tattoo,” whispered Bernard as I sat next to him, my hands shaking from the scrap. “Right here.” He tapped his hairy chest, near the word Mama in cursive over his heart.

I leaned and whispered to Bernard, “I would ink Judith on my heart, but I have no bare skin left.” My armpits were soaked with sweat. I readjusted my scarf.
“Override another tatt.”

“I also have no money.”

“Oh, please. I’ll hook you up,” he said. “I got your back. Always.”
Chapter 14

Seven a.m. Mass was packed. There were no seats left in the long pews, so parishioners spilled into the aisles. While parents were pulling kids from class, our church had never been so full. Not even during Easter. The sight was too much to take in. The air-conditioning unit, already failing, groaned, not used to cooling so many bodies.

Father Reese had devoted his homily to facing fear, not letting the fear of fire control us. Sister Augustine sang with particular strength. Through the window, New Orleans was fecund. Magnolias in bloom. Spanish moss spilling from the thick live oak branches. Wildly alive. I let my mind wander and imagined Judith’s face as she held the sword. Was it contorted in fear or were her eyes clear? I prayed for Judith, whoever she was. I prayed for Jack and Sister Therese and every other person alive. Even Prince. Finally I had a role to play in this fucked-up show of life. God wanted – needed – me to find the culprit. I could contribute, tip the balance.

Sister Augustine had arranged a noon assembly in the auditorium with Riveaux and with the homicide detectives Grogan and Decker. The police were more than halfway through their interviews of 260 students and 40 staff members.

As we reluctantly filed in and took our seats in the auditorium, I removed my gloves to peel a green satsuma. I noticed Rosemary Flynn sitting by herself. I sat next to her. “Hi.”

“What do you need now?” asked Rosemary without looking up, her eyes fixed on my ungloved hands and tattooed knuckles. Her red lipstick was as loud as she was quiet.
“Just saying ‘hello,’” I said as she opened a textbook, *Conceptual Physics*. “Now you have to say ‘hello’ to me. That’s how it works.”

“Hello. Can I return to my reading now?”

“We’re going to have a memorial Mass for Sister Therese and Jack, and we are planning to see Jamie West at the hospital soon,” said John Vander Kitt, who was sitting in front of us, “to cheer him up a bit. Who wants to visit Jamie again?”

“Me,” I said.

Rosemary rolled her eyes. “I need to sit closer to the stage,” she said as she gathered her books and moved to a seat three rows down.

John sipped coffee from a mug he had brought down from the lounge. He was never without his hot coffee, even in the soupy and swampy heat of New Orleans.

A moment later, Grogan, Decker, and Riveaux sat down in the row in front of us. Sister Augustine walked to them with a smile.

“What else can we do to help with your investigation?” Sister Augustine asked Riveaux.


“No dedicated coaches any more. Our sports programme was cut. No funds, I’m afraid. Low enrolment.” Sister Augustine sighed.

“Sad state of affairs,” said Grogan, “folks losing their way, thinking they don’t need Jesus in their lives.”

“Well, we will be talking to everyone else,” Decker said sharply.
Sister Augustine said: “We will support you 100 per cent. I will bring you cold water when you need it. We will make sure that you and your team have everything you need.” She readjusted her veil, walked away briskly with her clipboard.

“Think she’s always this nice?” Riveaux whispered to Detective Grogan. “It’s unnerving.”

“She’s a pro,” he said. “She’s been principal here since the dawn of time, since before I was a kid.”

Bernard Gregory took the seat on my right and slid his toolbox under the seat in front of him. “Aloha,” he said. His Saint Sebastian’s janitor uniform, denim coveralls, was rolled up at the sleeves. His long black hair was pulled up. His goatee had grown a little longer and his five-o’clock shadow was more like midnight.

“Mr Gregory, hello,” I said with my mouth full of citrus. “Mr Vander Kitt, hello.”

“Aloha, fine friends, sharers of knowledge.” Bernard saluted John and me.

“Here,” said Bernard under his breath as he put a roll of dollar bills in my orange peel.

“What is that?” I said as I chewed.

“For your Judith tattoo.”

I swallowed, almost choking. “I was kidding.”

“I wasn’t.” He looked angry and blinked his long black eyelashes. “We made a deal. I got mine last night.” He pulled his coveralls down his chest slightly and on his eggshell-white skin I detected the puffy outline of cursive JUDITH tattoo under a transparent bandage. “Now you have to get yours, Sis.”

I stuffed the money from Bernard into my bag. “We’ll discuss this later.” I couldn’t get into it with him here with John listening. John was always listening.
“They sure are taking up most of our class time,” John said. Curls of coffee steam fogged his thin-metal-framed glasses.

“We have had two fires and two deaths. It’s kind of important.”


“Sister Therese could have fallen down the steps,” John said loudly as he sipped his coffee, “and broken her neck that way. Jack died because of the smoke. It’s a horrible end. I read about it. It’s like being smothered from the inside out.”

“Jackie C.” Bernard kissed his fist and raised it to the sky.

“I could have tried and convicted Prince Dempsey by now,” I said. “It’s not a mystery.”

John readjusted fogged glasses. “You really think it’s Prince Dempsey?” His forehead glistened with sweat.

“Yep. Bernard saw him in the east wing. Arsonists return to the scene of the crime, to survey their work. Peggy at the Prison Birth Centre said that.”

“You are the detective now.” Bernard touched my neckerchief. “I want one of those.”

“I miss Sister Therese,” said John. “I hope our school sleuth solves this riddle.”

“I’m close. I can feel it. Growing up as a closeted lesbian with a former nun mother teaches you everything you need to know about secret-keeping, reading a room, and people-reading.”


“I can play sleuth, too,” said John. “Where were you on Sunday night?” he asked Bernard.
“That night? Shit. I played a second line across Elysian Fields, threw back Wild Turkey, shadow-boxed, and then I passed out.”

“Sounds divine,” I whispered with my eyes closed. I wished I could slam back a double tequila. Feel it cleanse my brain like a sandblast.

“Is this thing on?” Riveaux’s voice on the mic squealed.

Sister Honour sneezed.

“Uh, hello,” Riveaux seemed confused by the mic. “One, two, three.”

Someone shouted from the back of the auditorium: “We can hear you.”

“Okay, dears. Most of y’all have seen me by now, we’ve been going more than a week here. But for new folks, I’m Fire Investigator Magnolia – Maggie – Riveaux from the New Orleans Fire Department.”

Rosemary Flynn sighed loudly.

Sister Honour sneezed. “Please get to the point! Parents are scared, and we have district exams for which we need to prepare.”

Riveaux cleared her throat. “We got two fires here on your premises. We got not one body but two dead bodies. Sister Therese’s death has been ruled an accident. Jack died on account of the smoke, and Detective Grogan and Sergeant Decker from the homicide team will continue to question everyone on staff. We’re more than halfway through the list. We need your help keeping parents informed so we can take statements from every student. We are also trying to work with the fifty or so students who have since transferred to other schools. For any parents feeling particularly anxious, I have a fresh batch of rose extract that I can provide. Rose is safe. Rose is an olfactory delight.
Rose has been proven to positively impact five autonomic parameters in the human body.”

“She’s certainly loquacious,” said Rosemary.

“And theatrical,” Sister Honour added, “like someone else we know.” Their eyes drifted my way.

“Ladies, gentlemen, Sisters, brothers,” Sister Augustine, who had slipped back on stage, and calmly took control of the microphone. “Please give our law enforcement your full attention.”

It was Sergeant Decker’s turn to take the mic. “Thank you, Sister. The NOPD is recommending a campus curfew to the mayor.”

“No way.” Bernard piped up from the audience.

“For the safety of the local citizens,” Sergeant Decker said, “from dawn to dusk, until we apprehend the arsonist, no one should be outside this campus, walking or loitering within this block. After dark, stay inside unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

Bernard laughed loudly. “Every resident on the block and in the neighbourhood will fight this. The bars will fight it.”

Decker replied: “There are no bars on this block, so they have nothing to fight.”

“You still can’t enforce it. This is New Orleans! We need to be free.”

“Save your soliloquy, Mr Gregory.” Sister Honour’s voice shook the auditorium.

“It’s true that the mayor would not support a wider curfew,” Sister Lourdes said in a measured tone, “but this is a private campus, and we need protection.”

Despite her role as our imaginative art instructor, Sister Lourdes could often be a beacon of sanity.
“Again, the curfew applies only to this campus. Make no mistake, an arsonist is targeting your school, your church, your convent and rectory, and probably the whole Catholic community of our city.” Detective Grogan spoke with a mellifluous voice. “We could be looking at a jihad situation here.”

There was a collective gasp.

“A curfew is good,” I said. “People are terrified.”

Grogan nodded.

“Yo,” Bernard bellowed. “Why’s this happening now, more than a week after the fires?”

“Catholic schools and churches across the city are at risk, y’all.” Grogan tapped into his folksy Cajun roots. Code switching. I knew it well. “Don’t take nothin’ for granted. Not one detail.” Grogan looked at me and smiled. “The Devil, as you know, Sisters, is in the details.”

“Any questions?” Riveaux pointed at the assembly crowd from the stage.


Riveaux and Grogan left the stage. Grogan walked towards me. Decker and Sister Augustine spoke near the stage’s apron, where a banner boldly proclaimed WE ARE NOT AFRAID! Saint Sebastian’s was hosting a series of prayer circles and a community rally in the coming days. Another one of Sister Augustine’s efforts to keep spirits high. To bring people back to the Word. In the hysteria, the faithful were needed again.
“We gotta help ’em,” said Bernard, with earnest eyes. “We can prove it to them. I think you’re right. I bet Prince left that shirt in your trash for the cops to find. Trying you set you up.”

“Prince walks around like he owns the place. We need to catch him off guard somehow.”

“I’ll help you,” said Bernard. “I got your back.”
Chapter 15

After the police assembly, the campus curfew went into effect. We sat at the convent’s dining table – me and Sisters Lourdes, Augustine, and Honour. Sister Lourdes said grace in Spanish and dedicated our devotion to the Lord, Jack Corolla, and Sister Therese. No music played. No air conditioning cooled the boiling air of the convent. The ceiling fan whirred with a strained groan.

“Has Prince been seen by a psychologist recently?” I asked after Sister Lourdes said Amen.

“Again with this obsession?” Sister Honour sighed.

I passed around the loaf of bread, baked by Sister Honour after school. Sister Honour was a traditionalist in every sense. Joined the convent when she was eighteen years old. What’s it like to spend sixty years without having sex? Did it make you crazy? Was it like bring imprisoned, or was it the opposite – freeing? Lush in its simplicity? Did she hate me because I had a life before the convent?

Sister Lourdes placed a thick slice of bread on her plate and smeared it with soft, golden butter.

Sweat burned the corners of my mouth.

Sister Honour rolled her eyes.

“Prince is wayward, that is true,” said Sister Augustine, after praying over her food a second time, “but he also infirm. We cannot forget that. It is our task to lead him to the righteous path.”
“That’s what Sister Therese believed.” Sister Lourdes blessed herself. “Sister Therese said every child of God was worthy of redemption.”

“Look where that got her.” I tore my slice of bread in half.

“Always the optimist.” Did Sister Honour always spit as she spoke, or only when she talked to me?

“Why are the police so sure that Sister Therese fell down the steps?” I asked.

“Where she landed on the floor,” said Sister Honour, “is consistent with the velocity of falling. If she was pushed, she would have been further out, bless her soul.”

Sister Honour made the sign of the cross. “Detective Grogan said they were quite sure.”

“What can we ever be totally sure of?” asked Sister Lourdes.

“The love of our Lord.” Sister Augustine smiled. “And we must honour the perfection of the gospel. He is depending on each and every one of us.” She winked at me.

I was never an easy sell for the Saint Sebastian community. After a year of dedicated service at the convent, I began to teach freshman music. My first class was boycotted by a dozen parents. A quick Google of me produced my criminal record, perverse song lyrics, pictures of me with Fuck the Police signs at queer liberation parades, images of me and my band topless and tattooed at the WYMN’S PUNK FESS$T, and who knows what else. It was obvious to anyone that before I was a novice of the Sublime Blood, Brooklyn-native Holiday Walsh was a troublemaker. Sister Augustine made a strong case to the convent, the bishop, and the diocese to accept me. “All will be absolved,” she often said. “What we practice, we become. We practice tolerance and radical faith.”
What the students and parents at Saint Sebastian’s didn’t know was that most of the Sisters of the Sublime Blood – except Sister Honour – were social justice activists. Sisters Therese and Lourdes had been arrested more times than me. Sister Therese spent what little of her free time she had protesting against everything from police brutality to the toxic, post-storm FEMA trailers laced with formaldehyde, the kind that Prince Dempsey lived in. The Sisters were also modest and resourceful. Sister Therese collected rainwater in barrels to use in the garden. Since waste was a sin, we composted and reused everything we could. We gave good scraps and fish bones to Voodoo and Big Red.

That night, it was my turn to wash the dishes, so I filled the basin with soapy water. As I washed the salad bowl, I looked over my shoulders, tracking my sisters’ movements. I could hear Sister Lourdes and Augustine practising a song down the long hall. Sister Honour sat on the sitting-room sofa reading the Old Testament, occasionally talking to herself. “You have already read this passage, Sister Honour,” she said to herself. “What a silly thing to do. I know, I know.”

How sad. She fenced with herself in a faux dialogue. Would no one else listen to her, give her a pep talk? She was a lonely seventy-eight-year-old woman with no one to call her own. Was that why she was so hateful? Sister T was about the same age but so different. Joyful.

After I dried the dishes, I walked outside. The curfew was on, so I crept slowly and hid myself behind trees until reached the convent garden bench. I sat in a tiny ball and closed my eyes. Big Red announced himself with vigour. As dusk settled, Voodoo hopped onto the bench and purred on my lap. Feral cats were as common in New Orleans
as gale-force winds tearing up the Gulf. They belonged to no one. Even Voodoo, who came to rely on us for food and cuddles, would bounce away after a minute of cuddles.

In this city, everything was hot. New York felt like an eternal winter in comparison. February was particularly brutal in Gotham. Freezing sleet that fell not vertically but sideways. Each frigid drop a scalpel. I remember the darkness of Brooklyn. The bleak subway platforms and soggy winter nights. The sun seemed to set as soon as it rose. Back then, before the light, I often slept so late I missed daytime altogether. The world’s only colour hummed in my lustrous gold cap and candy-red lipstick. The grey, windowless buildings bled into each other. I remember slogging down Greenpoint Avenue to the G train, travelling to the music school where I taught the guitar lessons. Two layers of denim, a proper parka, wool hat, waterproof boots, gloves that extended to the elbow, and a scarf made of Alpaca wool and I still froze. Miserable faces. Even the designer dogs of New York, so jolly during the spring, summer, and fall, begrudgingly did their business on the frozen pavement then sprinted immediately back inside. I would be happy to forget Brooklyn altogether.

That old feeling. So distant yet familiar. Like the night my mother told the family she was dying. I remember lighting a cigarette, leaning against the yellow bannister at the subway entrance. I called my mother back after she had called me three times. As I dialled, I heard the banshee squeal of my train sailing away in the distance.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Holiday, darling,” my mother replied in a flat tone. “Meet us for dinner.”

Family dinner – clue number one that something was wrong.

At our family apartment, Mom emerged from the bathroom looking
uncharacteristically made-up. Clue number two. Much to my irritation she was never one for make-up. I was that girl who longed for a mom who knew the best ways to blend eyeshadow, master liquid liner, and extend eyelash length. Toni, short for Antoinette, was as pious as one could be in our modern age without seeming like a freak extremist. This irony was never lost on me. A Roman Catholic acolyte with a gay son and a lesbian daughter.

When I told my parents I was gay, and then Gabe came out, they both sobbed.

Pop said, “What do you expect? This wasn’t what we had planned.”

“You’re our only kids,” said Mom. “Why are you doing this to us? To hurt us?”

“This is who we are,” I said. Moose was slack with fear, disappearing into the corner.

“I left the Order for this?” Mom cried. “I left my life for this? You’re both so selfish.”

“What do you want us to do? Pretend?” I asked angrily.

“You’re both queers. You want your awards now or later?” Dad asked. “Two coming-out parties or one?”

“I hate you!” Heat cascaded through me. Something cracked inside and would stay broken for years. “I hate you both! I wish you’d die!”

That was more than a decade ago. My guilt played on repeat like a dream song in my ear every night. Lyrics no one else heard. Except God.

Even our names reflected Mom’s faith and devotion. Gabriel for the angel. Holiday because every day was a sacred gift, a blessed holiday. Now I was a Sister of the Sublime Blood. I had experimented in every category: raw foodist, pole-dancer,
polyamory advocate, vegan, Paleo, phone psychic. But this was different. God, teaching music, sleuthing. I didn’t need love. I needed prayer. I liked living with all women – my sisters – women I had no interest in screwing. I needed the structure. Whatever the divine was, it was bigger than me. It felt like I had finally found my true place in New Orleans, with Sister Augustine. She’d never cast me out, like my parents did. Only if I did right by God, by the Order. It was up to me to find the arsonist, to protect my new home, new family.

A police car cruised by slowly. Marigolds withered along the kerb. Somehow the flowers endured the daily assault of heat, asphalt, dirt, and glass as innumerable cars sped by in the aftermath of the fires. How were these small expressions so resilient, even in the violent sun and torrential rain?
Chapter 16

Brushing my teeth was never an easy task without a mirror. I gargled mint mouthwash, spit, and walked to my bedroom. In front of my door, my foot met soft resistance. I looked down and screamed.

“Fuck.” Voodoo lay on the threshold of my bedroom. “Sorry, kitten. I didn’t see you there.” I was just cuddling with her outside, on the bench. She must have followed me in, slipping in as the door briefly open.

Voodoo was velvet black save for a tiny white diamond on the top of her head. Like the dozens of cats I see roaming New Orleans. She was squirrely and skittish but with a kind of humour that I found endearing. She was perfectly still. I looked again. She was dead.

“Oh my God.”

There was no blood on the ground. No open wound or severed limb or clubbed skull that I could tell. Eyelids fully open as if pried apart. Even its fur looked wrong.

“Sister Holiday,” Sister Honour’s bright silver hair glittered under her veil, “we are trying to sleep. Are you physically or simply mentally unable to let us have a moment of peace?”

“Voodoo is dead.”

“I’m not dead yet but you are certainly killing me.”

“She’s dead. A dead cat!”

Sister Lourdes poked her head into the hallway. “Estás bien? Okay over there? Sister Honour?”
From the staircase at the opposite end of the hallway, Sister Augustine strutted towards us with her clipboard. “Sisters?”

“It’s dead.”

“Slow down.” Sister Augustine dropped her voice.

“Somebody put Voodoo’s dead body in my doorway!”

Sisters Honour, Lourdes, and Augustine moved closer.

“Give it a break already.” Sister Honour threw her hands into the air.


“She’s one of God’s creatures, like all of us.” Sister Augustine stepped over the cat, into my room. “Sit down, Sister Holiday. You’ve had a fright.”

Sister Honour scoffed, walked into her room, and returned with a towel. “Do what needs to be done!” She threw the towel at my face.

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Get that thing out of here.”

“What are you going to do with the cat?” Sister Lourdes asked me.

“I can’t do it. It’s freaking me out.” I knelt down, my hands shook.

“Tough, tattooed Sister Holiday,” Sister Honour laughed. Then sneezed. “Not so tough after all.”

“Can someone help me?” I looked at my three Sisters. “Someone put this dead cat in my doorway. Someone is terrorising me. What if they killed her?”
“Do you think it was Prince Dempsey?” Sister Lourdes asked. “He does have a touch of the Devil in those eyes.”

“He couldn’t get into the convent even if he tried. I want us all to take a deep breath,” Sister Augustine said. “Can we all do that?”

I nodded.

“Pray for the poor creature,” she said.

Sister Lourdes said: “God delivered this body to you for a reason, Sister Holiday, to test your mettle.”

“Yes.” Sister Augustine rested her coffee on my dresser and gave me a hug. “I know you are strong, but you don’t know that yet.”

“Always in the centre of the action.” With the toe of her sensible black shoe Sister Honour tapped Voodoo’s stiff body. “The fire in the east wing. The cafeteria fire. Now a wretched dead beast in our sacred space. I’m not falling for it.” She lowered her voice. “I see you. I’m watching you.”

“We need to bury her,” said Sister Lourdes with a sign of the cross. “She deserves at least that, poor animal.” Her eyes watered, and her nose ran. “We never had animals in our home growing up. Little girls love to have pets, you know? But, oh, our barn cats, they were vicious little misses, let me tell you.” She talked quickly and profusely when nervous. Like John Vander Kitt.


“I’ll help you,” said Sister Lourdes.

“Thank you, Sister.” I stood up, my legs shaking. “Amen.”
Sister Lourdes, who was no older than fifty, bent down with ease. She looked at the feline corpse. “No, Dios mío. I can’t. Sweet animal, but I can’t.”

“Oh.”

“It’s too sad. I’m going to pray.” She walked back to her room.

“Burn it,” Sister Honour said.

“No more fire, please,” Sister Augustine said. She cleared her throat. “Don’t want it dug up. Lord knows what diseases it has. Please take care of it, and get your rest.” She blessed herself and walked away.

Alone again, I closed my eyes and cried softly. I didn’t want Sister Honour to hear me. I gagged as I knelt down, picked up Voodoo in a towel. Her black fur was still. Her body was light.

The moon set the clouds in motion as I carried death in my arms. Two police cars circled the block. With the campus curfew in place, I couldn’t be outside for too long. I had to work quickly. I took Voodoo to the far corner of Saint Sebastian’s garden. Past the satsuma tree. Behind the crab apple tree with its cherry-sized fruits, too many to count. Behind Sister Therese’s rain barrel and compost bins and mulch. On a sliver of damp ground that felt discrete, ground that no one needed to access, I put the towel down.

I pulled back the cloth to see her one last time. No purring. No chest rising and falling, as I had watched her do so many afternoons during shady naps under the satsuma tree. She was so dead she looked fake. Was she ever alive? Death is not sleep, not even close. Nothing can explain it even though it is the one certainty about being mortal.

Essence defines us. When the body loses life it loses the thing that makes it It. Death
changes us from verbs into objects. No breath, no Holy Spirit. Life force is visual but you can hear it and smell it too.

I went to the utility shed for a shovel. I flicked on the light. It smelled of lawnmower gas but it was clean and organised. The shovel was easy to find amid the other tools and red refillable gasoline containers with the Smart-Fill spouts.

I tried not to vomit as I dug the hole. I dug deep enough for me to stand in it and bury myself alive. Prayed for my little friend. *Hail Mary. Our life, our sweetness, our hope. Amen.* I wrapped the towel tight and placed Voodoo at the bottom of the hole. I returned the earth and cried. *The Lord is near to the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit. I was broken, crushed, and it brought the Lord nearer to me.* Some creatures are so feral they are unable to trust humans. But others, while scared, need to be touched – to be felt – and so they find us. We find each other.
The next morning, Sister Augustine asked me to accompany her to the jail to support
Prince Dempsey during his arraignment. I couldn’t say no.

Inside the jail lobby she stood next to a broken vending machine, leaning against
the wall with her rosary. She was the shepherd of our school’s flock.

“Sad,” said Riveaux in the lobby of the jail. She pointed her bony finger to the
sign that said POLICE: FIRST FLOOR / FIRE: SECOND FLOOR / JAIL: BASEMENT.

“What?”

“This broke-ass city. We’re so tapped we have to put the police department, the
jail, and the fire department all together in one dysfunctional family in one rotting
building.”

“Churches are broke, too. And Catholic schools. The diocese is selling buildings
left and right.”

“We’ll always have Mardi Gras.” Riveaux pointed to the purple and green Mardi
Gras beads that hung from the doorknobs.

“Thank God.” I made the sign of the cross.

“Even though we’re broke, this city keeps getting weirder. Too many parties. Too
much wine.”

“I wish. Food too spicy.”

“Never spicy enough.” Then she turned toward the back office.

“Wait.” I stopped her. “Someone put Voodoo, er, a dead cat, in front of my
bedroom door last night.”
“Grim. Maybe it turned up on its own to atone for its sins.”

I made the sign of the cross and Riveaux walked to her office.

Sister Augustine approached, rosary in hand. “I know that Prince is a handful, but he’s our handful.”

“He vandalised the Vieux Carré Cathedral.”

“Allegedly vandalised,” Sister Augustine whispered.

“We’re falling apart. Jackie and Sister Therese are dead. The campus has a curfew. My blouse was planted in my office – my classroom, I mean – to frame me. My guitar pick was left on Sister Therese’s body. Prince is terrorising us and trying to frame me.”

“Don’t crack, Sister Holiday.” She smiled an easy smile that calmed me.

“Compassion, Sister Holiday. We don’t know yet if it is indeed arson. We cannot cast judgement. Now is a time for our prayer and steadfast love.” I wished she would hold me, sing to me, put me to sleep. I wanted it all to end.

A tall, unfamiliar woman powered through the main entry doors. She was a smudge of scarlet. Red-framed sunglasses, red chador, red Gucci purse, red leather briefcase, and a pair of striking red high heels that my old self would have loved to wear in New York.

She stood out in the dead concrete of the jail, which was rank with the sharp stench of piss. I watched her place her purse on a green chair, smile at the clerk behind the glass, who was typing, most likely processing Prince’s arrest record, from the chatter that I could overhear.
The arraignment clerk sat at the same cluttered table as the representative from the district attorney’s office and a paralegal shuffling papers. The fourth person at the round table was the court clerk.

“Once the complaint is finished, I need to see the charges against my client,” the tall woman with the fancy purse said to the court clerk, a middle-aged man with acne-pocked skin, plump arms, and a windswept comb-over.

“The affidavit?”

“Everything.”

Who was this tall woman? I watched Sister Augustine and the woman share a few quiet words. Two women, two veils. One Catholic. One Muslim. I slouched on the stiff waiting room bench.

Thirty minutes passed. My lower back tightened.

Another hour passed. I needed coffee.

There were two water fountains next to each other at varying heights. An island in the middle of the lobby provided people with a dedicated place to fill out bail bonds and other forms. All the pens had been stolen. A recessed glass case showcased vintage New Orleans Police Department gear: a gas mask from the 1950s, a badge from the 1920s, an old gun from the 1890s. A faded flag and large city seal occupied the corner. “To Protect and to Serve.” I scoffed. My old man was a police chief. I knew how hard cops worked. It was a hard, thankless line of work. But I had seen far too many rogue cops take a bit too much pleasure out of beating down young queers. Especially black and brown kids who hung out on the Chelsea Piers. My dad was the first to drop a gay-bashing case. Even when his own kids were involved. I learned early that family was of your own design.
learned the fine art of distrust. To rely only on myself and God. To hunt for clues in unexpected places and in plain sight. To read a room quickly. I had to learn how and where to find other gay people. With just two pointed questions, I could find any discreet or hidden gay bar. Even in the most backwater, KKK-friendly swamps of the Louisiana bayou. Not that I would be visiting any bars any time soon.

Sister Augustine continued to whisper to the scarlet woman who was typing with her red manicured thumbs on a red-bedazzled phone. I heard words – “lost,” “compassion,” “second chances” – escape from Sister Augustine’s lips. I avoided eye contact with them both.

Then a lithe blonde woman who looked like Prince Dempsey walked in.

“Joelle,” Sister Augustine said. They hugged and exchanged words and insulin medication. Then the woman left as quickly as she came. After Nurse Connors, Sister Augustine was the designated health carer for Prince’s diabetes medicine.

The posters on the lobby wall were tattered. I read all of their text four times. GOT DRUGS? asked one poster in Comic Sans. I wish I did, I thought. A quick and dirty high at that moment would have been divine.

I lumbered over to the bulletproof-glass barrier between the lobby and the clerks and officer on duty. The officer sitting at the desk seemed barely conscious, the blue light of his computer reflecting in his glasses. I knocked on the barrier. He jerked back hard.

“Excuse me,” I said.

Irritated, he pointed down.

“What are you pointing to?”
“Look down!” He jabbed his stubby index finger down towards the ground angrily.

I looked down and to the left. In front of me, in text so tiny I had to put my face against the paper to read it, was a sign and a green phone on the wall. TO SPEAK TO THE DESK OFFICER PICK UP THE GREEN PHONE. Someone had used a pen to write in the letter “e” in “phone.”

I picked up the phone and put the receiver to my mouth. It smelled of bad breath and bad luck.

“I need to talk to Investigator Riveaux again.”

“She’s busy.”

“What about Grogan and Decker?”

“They’re even busier.” His nameplate said Max. “Take a seat.”

“Get Riveaux on the phone.” I pounded the glass with my gloved fist.

“Back away from the glass right now unless you want to get arrested.”

“Max, listen.” I hit the glass again, so hard my teeth trembled. “I need to see Riveaux. I’m Sister Holiday, with the school that burned down. Almost burned down.”

He grunted, slowly picked up his black desk phone.


“To clarify,” I shouted into the gross phone, “my gold tooth is real.”

“Huh?”
“REAL GOLD. Gold is an ancient prosthetic dental practice. The body accepts gold better than any precious metal.”

“Sit down,” he said.

Max looked daggers at me. I wanted to kick him in the teeth. Constantly resisting my habits was tiring.

“Riveaux will be out in a sec,” he said, then slipped back from the transparent partition. It was thick enough to reflect some of me. The ghost.

Riveaux finally emerged from the office area, flanked by Detective Grogan and Sergeant Decker.

Riveaux paused, closed her eyes, and sniffed the air. “Hold up! This is important. Who is wearing Chanel No 5?”

The red-clad woman sheepishly raised her hand. It seeped from her like she had fallen into a vat of it. It made my eyes water.


Sergeant Decker rolled her eyes.

“When is Prince Dempsey’s arraignment?” asked the Chanel woman.

“Who are you?” Decker looked at the woman’s headscarf and handed a pile of papers to Max. She whispered something in his ear, and he giggled.

“Attorney Sophia Kumar from the firm McDade, Kumar, and Haheez.”

“The uptown firm?” asked Grogan. His eyes were the colour of honey. His easy manner and Southern slang made me aware of how much of an outsider I was in New
Orleans. Even after three years. “What brings you all the way downtown, Attorney Kumar? The gumbo?”

“I represent Mr Dempsey. I was working the pro bono arraignment shift when the call from Sister Augustine came in.”

Riveaux laughed, shook her head, and wiped sweat from her eyebrows. “‘Pro bono arraignment shift.’ We have thousands of people getting properly beat down – wives fleeing abusive husbands, kids kidnapped, old ladies robbed – and you’re wasting your time and my time on this guy?”

“Though he is a poor young man, and we know how the war against the poor rages on, Mr Dempsey has constitutional rights like everybody else in the great state of Louisiana,” Attorney Kumar said. Riveaux and Grogan smiled. Decker rolled her eyes.

“And he has diabetes,” Kumar continued. “We need to check his blood sugar. Speaking of the constitution, your probable cause for his arrest was what?”

Decker frowned. “Let’s start with the fact that we have sworn testimony and we ID’d him for vandalism via CCTV feed. And possession of a weapon.”

Grogan said: “We have high-resolution video footage of your client opening two tombs from the 1700s—”

“Technology is not secure,” Kumar interrupted. “Hacking, cyber breaches. How do we know the video feed wasn’t manipulated?”

“The system is secure, I assure you. As clear as day, the video captures him defacing crypts and throwing a bucket of paint on the oldest historic site in the city,” said Grogan. “He had a snow-white pit bull by his side.”

Kumar readjusted her scarf. “Why is homicide on this case?”
Decker cleared her throat. “There are two deaths related to arson where your client attends school.”

“We want to see this footage of the alleged vandalism.”

“You will,” said Grogan. “At discovery.”

“None of the items found in Mr Dempsey’s vehicle were his possessions. You have no direct evidence. I will be asking for his release on his own recognisance.”

“Good luck with that,” I said.

“He’s a flight risk.” Grogan yawned.

“And an arson suspect!” I added. “It’s an inside job.”

“Who are you?” Attorney Kumar asked me.

“Ignore her,” Riveaux said to Kumar. “She’s nobody.”

_Nobody?_
Chapter 18

Inside the overly air-conditioned courthouse in the same building as the jail, Prince’s arraignment convened. It seemed like I had spent hours in the jail lobby, sitting, waiting, while Attorney Sophia Kumar met with Prince in the pen and reviewed their defence.

Kumar, wearing an even heavier application of Chanel No 5 but a different colour headscarf – she must have changed in the ladies’ room – sat at the defence table next to Prince. Riveaux sniffed the air like a feral cat smelling the vent of a kitchen during a shrimp boil. Seated in the front row of the audience next to Sister Augustine, I pushed the tip of my tongue into my gold incisor. Detective Grogan and Sergeant Decker sat at the back. Attorney Kumar grabbed the arrest record in a manila folder with a two-hole punch. She flipped through it furiously.

The assistant district attorney, Michael Armando, balding with a kind, plump face and the same circumference of beer gut that had afflicted most of my old poker buddies in Brooklyn, cleared his throat. Yes, Poker. I knew how to hedge a bet.

“Your Honour,” ADA Armando said, “the basic facts surrounding the nature of this unlawful conduct are shocking and repellent to the good people of New Orleans.”

The arraignment judge, the Honourable Jaqueline Barton, who appeared as acutely overworked as the ADA, was a middle-aged woman with a smart, short haircut. There was not one wrinkle on her smooth skin. She peered over her thick glasses and said in an aggressive Louisiana twang: “Assistant District Attorney Armando, without
theatricality can you please summarise the charging document? Keep it short. The greatest hits.”

“Can do.”

“What is the state charging Mr Dempsey with today? Resisting arrest? Vandalism? The works?”

“Your Honour, the state alleges that on the day of first of August, Prince Dempsey was captured on CCTV damaging historic tombs and throwing a bucket of red paint on the Vieux Carré Cathedral in Jackson Square in New Orleans in the Orleans Parish of Louisiana.”

“Is that where New Orleans is? I thought the city had moved to Alabama,” she said.

“Your Honour?”

“Sarcasm, ADA. Look it up.”

“Yes, your Honour.

“Continue.”

“Just being thorough.” He laughed nervously. In the front row, I felt the spring of his tension. “As we were saying, the state is charging Prince Dempsey with one felony count of vandalism as he engaged in the wilful destruction of a valuable property in a manner that has defaced it and added a layer of shame and blemish that diminishes this historic property’s value. He damaged two of the oldest tombs in the Cathedral cemetery. We seek a felony conviction here, with six months of jail time, because, in accordance with the city code, the damage to the property is in excess of five hundred dollars.”

“And the charge of resisting arrest?” the judge said, with her nose in a folder.
The ADA stammered. “Yes. One count of resisting arrest. And possession of a handgun without a state firearms licence.”

I watched Prince closely, waiting for any change in his expression or movement. How would he react to the words? I would be his human polygraph test. He didn’t react, though. Nothing phased him. Was he dead inside or a great actor?

Judge Barton closed her folder. “Attorney Kumar, what is your plea?”

“We plead not guilty, Your Honour. Prince was not resisting arrest. None of the exhibits from the car trunk are his. There is no direct evidence connecting Mr Dempsey to any crimes. Additionally, my client has Type 1 diabetes.”

“As do I,” said Judge Barton. “So?”

“Your Honour, I was about to say that on the day of the arrest, Prince Dempsey was suffering from low blood sugar. Additionally, my client cannot hear out of his left ear. It was tragic damage he endured when the most recent storm tragically launched a satsuma tree through his mother’s apartment, tragically crushing Mr Dempsey’s head.”

Prince sighed audibly.

“Tragic,” I whispered to Sister Augustine.

Attorney Kumar continued: “We have a sworn document from the Dempsey’s family doctor testifying to his severe and tragic hearing loss.”

“You assert that your client was not, as six NOPD officers stated, trying to outrun authorities on a nineteen-minute chase?”

“That is correct, Your Honour. The instant that Prince saw the police car lights – his rear-view mirror had detached and his side mirrors were all cracked due to the recent hail – he pulled over dutifully.”
“Your Honour” – the ADA bolted up from his chair – “is this a joke?”

“Additionally,” Attorney Kumar continued, “we plead not guilty and we request that Mr Dempsey is released on his own recognisance because he is not a flight risk and he needs the support of his service dog, BonTon. Additionally, we cannot verify the credibility or the validity of the video footage that allegedly captures my client engaging in unlawful conduct at the Vieux Carré Cathedral. Mr Dempsey is an easy mark. He is poor. He has PTSD and a history of maladies. He’s the target here. Your Honour, this case is a set up.”

“Your Honour,” ADA Armando bayed. “We have a sworn affidavit from the city’s CCTV technician, who claims that we have high-resolution, time-stamped video footage of the defendant, Prince Dempsey, in the criminal act of vandalism of the Vieux Carré Cathedral, which is, I may add, listed as a protected edifice on the historic registry of the state, not to mention defacing three-hundred-year-old tombs. We request a speedy preliminary trial.”

“Your Honour” – Attorney Kumar smiled as she interrupted him – “if we may?”

“You may.”

Sister Augustine whispered, “It feels like an old-time movie, how smart they are. Hasn’t God given us true capacity for articulation?”

I was too stunned by her comment to reply.

“We don’t know the source of the CCTV footage,” Attorney Kumar said passionately. “We don’t know if this is a manipulated video feed that was rerouted by a bad actor into the city’s system. We do not know if this was tampered with to set up my client.”
Judge Barton grew impatient. “It’s says here we have six brand-new CCTV
cameras – that must have been pricey … wonder whose pensions got clipped for them –
installed in Jackson Square last year. Can we not have faith that these pension-eating
CCTV cameras installed by the city are serving their intended function? Or are you a
technology expert, too?” The judge glared at Sophia Kumar.

I tried to conceal my smile.

“We request bail set for twenty thousand dollars,” the assistant district attorney
said. “The state is offering extremely damning information here.”

“Your Honour, we would like to remind the court that *none* of the allegations are
proven by the court,” Attorney Kumar countered.

“Not yet,” said the assistant district attorney, his male pattern baldness revealing a
shiny scalp beneath. Grogan cleared his throat in the back row.

“There is no need for bail. This family has no money for bail, and Mr Dempsey
will lose his job if bail is introduced, which is an unnecessary burden.”

The ADA jumped in: “My learned colleague has underscored the historic
significance of the site of this vandalism, which underscores our request for bail.”

“Your Honour, I testify to the profoundly decent character of my client, Prince
Dempsey. Please look closely at this young man, Your Honour.” Prince looked doleful,
his blonde hair smoothed behind his ear. “Your Honour, Prince Dempsey is not a choir
boy. He is just a boy. He’s had troubles in his past. We all have. Now, he is being
targeted. Look at the audience here today.” Attorney Kumar pointed to Sister Augustine
and me. I leaned back in surprise. “Even my client’s favourite music teacher, Sister
Holiday, er…” – she flipped through pages of notes on her legal pad – “Sister Holiday,
and his principal at his beloved school, Sister Augustine, at Saint Sebastian’s, are both here today to support him as guardians and his spiritual compass.”

“Catholic Sisters, no less. Does your client have a job?”

“Sister Augustine testifies that she will give Prince a new part-time job as a groundskeeper at the school. As you can see, Prince Dempsey does have a long, extensive history in New Orleans, even after he was evacuated during Katrina as a toddler. He was in foster care from the age of six to eight. He has deep community ties both in the city and the parish. He is an advocate for shelter dogs. He volunteers at the shelter and he rescues animals. He poses no flight risk whatsoever.”

Judge Barton tucked her chin to her chest and looked at Prince over her glasses.

“Young man, we’re going to release you today on your own recognisance,” the judge said. “But stay out of trouble and we require restrictions on travel. The client can’t leave the state. You understand? GET A HEARING AID,” she yelled.

“Understood, Your Honour.” Attorney Kumar smiled.

The judge, writing in her book, said, “I’m setting the date right now for you all to come back to court to see if there is any potential agreement or plea that can be reached.”

With one gavel smack, Judge Barton said, “This session is adjourned.”

Prince caught my eye. He winked at me. I winked back.
Chapter 19

After the arraignment and Prince’s release, I begged Riveaux to drop me back at the convent. I didn’t have a way home and I didn’t want to walk. Sister Augustine left with Attorney Kumar before I could catch up with them. More than that, I needed to know what Riveaux knew. As we drove, she spaced out. Answered my questions with one-word responses. We parked in front of Saint Sebastian’s east wing.

She yawned. “Even when I’m smoking a cigarette I need a cigarette.” She shifted in the driver’s seat again. She was either rigidly upright or shifting. “What’s that about?”

“You okay?” I asked.

“Fine,” she replied. “Just need this day to be over.”

The sidewalk shrine for Jack and Sister Therese had grown larger. Someone had added a few tea lights and taller votives. Their fires were small, contained in glass, but they spat and sparked with fussy wicks. Students, their families, and neighbours had placed flowers, prayer cards, and rosaries in front of the pictures of Jack and Sister Therese. I scanned the crowd, looking for faces that seemed out of place. But I also felt watched. By eyes from someone, somewhere out of reach, like a shadow with no body.

“Gotta go,” Riveaux said with no emotion as she turned the key, killing the car’s ignition. “You can hop out. Tonight’s perfuming is an elegant ocean breeze. My take on Dior Dune. A classic. Less saltwater though, more coastal storm. Not a hurricane kinda storm. A gentle—”

“Stop talking and discuss something with me for a minute.”

“Let’s get out, then. I need to stretch my legs. It’s two hundred degrees in here.”
“I can’t talk to people right now. Wait for them to pass then we can get out.”

“One minute, then I’m gone.” Sweat sailed down her neck.

The skin inside my gloves was wrinkling. She readjusted her rear-view mirror and stared hard at something with her violet eyes.

“Will the ADA charge Prince for the fires,” I asked, “in addition to the vandalism and resisting arrest and all that? And for the murders?”

“I know this is exciting, some drama in a nun’s life, but we have a process. We have to be thorough. Prince has been arraigned for the vandalism, firearms possession, and resisting. We have no evidence on him for the fires, and he has at least one solid alibi. We have some more students and staff to question. The parents are upset. No one is cooperating. That week of cancellation set us back big time and kids have scattered all over town.”

“Go through the evidence with me.” The heat was making me delirious. We should have opened the car doors, but I needed Riveaux to focus, to listen to me.

“Say extra prayers or meditate or something. You’re stressing me out. Stress is scientifically proven increase cortisol. Bad for the nervous system. Bad for every system.” Riveaux coughed and wriggled in her seat. My back was soaked. My blouse felt hot-glued to my skin. The crowd at the makeshift shrine finally dispersed.

“Let me back into the east wing for another look.”

“Hell, no. We were just there. Evidence is logged. Scenes are tagged. The electricity’s still out, so you won’t be able to see anything.”

Two police cars idled on Prytania Street.

“I’ll slip in through the alley.”
“I’m too tired to fight with you,” she said with a frown. “If I tell you more facts – facts that will be available to the public and press soon enough anyway – will you leave me the hell alone?”

I made the sign of the cross.

“Our champion arson dog, Sparky, detected flammable liquid in the corner of the second floor of the east wing, but not the cafeteria. We are finding evidence alright, but none of it links to Prince.”

“He used gloves.” I held up my gloved hands. “Easy enough to procure.”

“Prince’s DNA wasn’t a match to the two cigarette butts found at the scene. One was yours, and the other had no saliva on it.”

“He will do this again if we don’t jump now. He’s just getting started.”

“He is still a person of interest in the investigation, but we have no evidence or a motive yet. There are three main reasons people become arsonists.”

“What are they?”

“Money, revenge, and control.”

“I’ve already told you, Prince wants control.”

“For your own safety, drop it,” she said with no hint of warmth. “Get out.” She reached over me to push the passenger door open.

I left the smothering heat of her musty car for the blasting humidity of the street. Sweat poured down my back. My Tree of Life tattoo was flooded. If I could have torn my skin off, I would have. But I couldn’t escape myself that easily. She slammed the door and drove off. After her car disappeared down First Street, I turned into the alley, towards the east wing.
I had no idea if there was anything new to find in the charred wing, and Riveaux had told me to drop it. But Saint Sebastian’s was my home. I could unlock the riddle, but I needed to be alone in the school, to hear it breathe, feel again where secrets were hiding. Every building is like sheet music. In the same way that space between musical notes tells you a story about the song, I knew how to look for clues between the obvious.

All week I had felt a presence. Shadows following me, anticipating my next move. I turned the details over and over in my mind. The east wing classroom where I found Jamie and Lamont. Jack dead in the stairwell. My burned blouse. A bundle of gas-saturated clothing. Sister Therese thrown down the stairs. Her teeth broken. My guitar pick on her body. The precision of it all. The chemistry and calculation. Not one thing out of place.

Two cops on duty. One showed the other something on his phone. I looked over my shoulders, lifted the yellow Do Not Enter tape, and opened the door to the charred building. I would see more if I searched alone. Riveaux distracted me. I followed the misshapen light bulbs, like fingers pointing to the fire’s origin in the corner. I let my eyes wander, hoping I might see a new clue or detail. Then I traced specific paths. Over the burnt books, wet ash, insulation torn from the walls like an eviscerated stuffed animal.

Ever doubt the almighty power of fire? Visit a fire scene. The Phoenix myth made me sick. Illusion of wings rising from the ashes. Nothing can be renewed in rubble. Except for an idea. I kicked a wet pencil across the room. Half-burnt textbooks lay splayed open like the highway roadkill.

Off the entrance to the classroom, I saw the janitor’s closet. It was a narrow door in the hallway. So easy to miss. Surely Investigator Riveaux and her crew had scoured it
a dozen times, but since Jack Corolla was dead, maybe there was a connection of some kind. A clue. At least the closet warranted a second look.

I turned the doorknob right, left, and right again. I made sure there was no key in the keyhole. I opened the door and heard it click closed behind me. I turned the knob again to make sure it could open. It did.

Inside the closet the air was thin, reeking of cleansers, bleach, rubber gloves, and mould. Materials designed to cleanse often smell poisonous. Where Jack and Bernard stored the custodial supplies.

Against the wall was a four-step ladder. I opened it, blew dust off the steps. I climbed to get a better look at the white shelves but all I saw were boxes of jumbo trash bags, soap, old crusty batteries leaking blue acid at the tips, and industrial-sized rolls of paper towels.

Then it popped. The light bulb burned out. Total darkness.

Still on the ladder, I gripped the rubber handle tightly. I heard a metallic click. The door. After I descended, I held my hands in front of me to feel for the doorknob. I knocked over something loud and heavy as I reached for it. Finally I found the knob. But it was locked. I tried another slow turn, pulling the door into myself and lifting up, the way I did with finicky doors in Brooklyn. Nothing.

“Hello,” I screamed. “Anyone? Anybody here?” I tried to get the attention of anything. Even the wall. I slammed the broom handle against the pipes. How the hell did I get into this mess?

_Hail Mary. Don’t leave me, Mary._ I cracked my forehead against a pipe.
I sat on the ladder step in total darkness for what seemed like an hour, though it could have been three. *Hail Mary, Mother of God. Sister Holiday, grow up. This is what you wanted. This is what you chose.*

I exhausted myself with my screaming. I ran my hands over every surface.

*Dear God, I know. Give me a light. I don’t want to ask for too much. Just a light.*

*I’ll handle the rest.*

I ran my hands along the wall again, looking for another light. The ceiling was high – perhaps there were two separately wired bulbs. One I hadn’t discovered yet. In the complete darkness, I could only feel with my hands along the walls.

I was dehydrated and dizzy. I sat down again on the buckled ladder step. Never had I wished for a phone so badly. *Dear Lord, please deliver unto me a cell phone.* Nuns are liberated from the servitude of excess and extravagance. But come on.

In the darkness I felt a cool metal box. I took a breath and opened it. The firm shape of the items inside were familiar and distinct. Matchbooks. At least a dozen. The matchbooks felt new with hard paperboard covers, not soft and mushy, a result of relentless New Orleans humidity.

*Hail Mary.* I plucked one matchbook from the box, slid open the cover, felt the comb-like arrangement of matches. I tore off a paper match like I had done countless times before. Pressing the tiny bulb of the match head against the back, I struck, igniting a pop and two quick sparks as the match crackled to life.

In the tiny bead of new light, I quickly scanned the walls and shelves of the dusty closet.
Why did Bernard have so many matchbooks from New Orleans’ bars? Or maybe they were Jack’s?

The match was burning down fast but I blew it out before it could sear the skin of my thumb and index finger. I was plunged back into the blackness, but knowing the room’s layout, I tried the doorknob again.

I tried to lock onto something calming. Something luminous. I thought about my Sacred Heart tattoo burning eternally, a hidden fire, under my black blouse. I thought about the chancel candle of my Sister Antoinette tattoo. And mom’s smile. At the end, she was so frail she practically slipped through my arms when I hugged her. We lived less than two miles apart in Brooklyn, but I hated visiting. It kicked up the dust of my past. Tiny reminders of my misspent youth nagged: the same carpet I vomited on. Same wall I punched. The same damn Chandler novels I read and re-read when I was grounded every other month.

My parents were both second-generation Bay Ridge, Brooklyn Catholics with Irish heritage. My mother was a former nun with the Pristine Sisters of the Word. This had real-world consequences. I wasn’t allowed to “bring boys home until you’re seventeen.” Little did they know that the ever-revolving door of my school “girlfriends,” warmly welcomed by my parents, was my vehicle for high jinks: sex, drugs, rock and roll. I was closeted until I was seventeen, but I could never remember a time when I wasn’t gay. I also couldn’t remember much before the age of ten. Growing up in New York accelerates everything. Some people say they have memories from as early as two years old, but I always felt like I sprang from the unknown into speeding subway train of adulthood. Like Athena jumping, fully formed, from Zeus’s forehead.
I had lost my virginity – if you could call it that, for no sex ed class I took discussed lesbian sex or what gay was or how it was defined, so, at the time, I wasn’t sure – in my junior year of high school. The daughter of a stock-market maverick and virtuoso in the world of “cool jazz” which was far from cool and as jazzy as a car alarm. Nina had a torrent of long, wavy bronze hair, pale skin, and French New Wave style, replete with black beret, tight-fitting striped tops, and infernos in her brown eyes. She never wore a bra. We started hooking up when I was seventeen and she was sixteen. We were still messing around many years later, when I left for New Orleans at age thirty. If either of us had too much to drink and sent a drunk text, we’d end up in bed together.

During all those long years, Nina and I had very little in common, nor did we talk much. I was terrible at small talk and worse at faking it. To be honest, I didn’t even like her. We had three things in common: we both loved music, fucking, and leaving. That feeling of a door swinging shut behind us.

Nina and I never defined our relationship as “dating.” I toyed with Nina and she messed with me. When I caught myself thinking about her too much or falling for her, I’d kiss another girl in front of her. She’d stomp off theatrically. If she paid a boy – usually a feathery gamine skater with cliché concept hair – too much attention at a show, I’d throw a drink in the poor man’s face. A perfectly good six-dollar tequila, gone. Nina took me into her mouth only to drop me and bat me around, the way the cat caught and released mice, a slow death dance, in my family’s Brooklyn apartment.

After high school, Nina enrolled at NYU. She moved out of her dad’s Brooklyn brownstone and he bought her a small studio apartment on West 4th. She never had roommates, so we always had the place to ourselves. We messed around a lot. The last
time I saw her, we had such gymnastic sex we broke her expensive new bedframe. We started on the striped grey-and-white rug of her stripe-heavy studio – “a contemplative binary,” she said, “starts the décor story” – pulling each other’s clothes off so sloppily that Nina’s blouse button got stuck in my hoop earring and almost ripped my earlobe off. My black dress draped over the bathtub ledge.

We slid around on her bed so roughly the headboard rattled.

“Don’t stop.” She was underneath me, digging her nails into my shoulder and arm. My back rained sweat. “Harder.”

“We’re going to break your bed.”

“Don’t stop,” she said with her eyes closed. “Yes. Like that.” My hair was in her mouth. Her mascara smudged. Eyeliner collected in one corner. “I want to see stars.” She ran her hands up and down my back.

I put my hands on her ribs. Her skin was soft and blazing hot.

She tucked my hair behind my left ear, kissed my neck. “The new ink is trashy,” she said, “but this little dove is cute.”

“It’s tough, not cute.”

“Delicate.” She kissed the tiny white bird under my jawline, then palmed my tits until my nipples stiffened, and pinched them both, hard.

“Ow. Bitch!”

“You love it.”

I did love it. She knew what I wanted before I did.

She brought her lips to mine, gently. Her tongue on mine. She traced the tattoo on the interior of my right arm. To an untrained eye, it was a smattering of black notes on a

Nina, a beast of a drummer, hummed the notes. Low to high, a scale with holes and jumps that falls at the end. My self-portrait as a disjointed scale. It sounded achingly beautiful in her throat. Her torrent of bronze hair was bright against the striped pillowcase.

Nina put her hand on the centre of my sternum, on my Sacred Heart of Jesus tattoo. “This one I hate. Too creepy.” Flames from the rose-red heart shot up to my collarbone. The burning organ was pierced by thorns, surmounted by the cross. “But I can’t look away.”

Rays of divine light emanated from my tattooed heart. The heart’s fire symbolized not only love but the transformative power of love. Fury. The electrical surge of a resurrected body.

“The Sacred Heart was popularised, in part, by nuns.”

“Give me the book report later.” She kissed my neck, touched my crucifix. “Why do you wear this?”

“It reminds me—”

“Of what?”

“That there’s more.”

She blinked slowly, put the cross on the tip of her tongue, like she was testing to see if it was poison.

“Don’t.” I pulled the cross away.

“We’re monsters,” she said.

“Beautiful monsters.” I kissed her, softly, then had to stop, just to look. It was too
much. How her chin lifted, eyes rolled back in her head. The muscles in her neck.

She put both hands on my face, thumb on my bottom lip. “Why are you so gorgeous?”

I had to stop, just to look at her. It was too much. The way her breathing shallowed. How her chin lifted, eyes rolled back in her head. With her eyes closed she put both hands on my face. “Why are you so gorgeous?”

She grabbed my arms, pinned me down. I tried to wiggle free.

“Don’t move,” she said.

I’d rather die than be restrained by a man, but when a woman holds you down and looks at you with hellfire in her eyes, like she wants to tear your heart out with her teeth – too good. A police siren howled on West 4th Street.

“Wanna pray?” I asked.

“You are depraved,” said Nina with her eyes closed. Her long hair tumbled over her tanned shoulders. Only rich bitches could tan in the depth of a New York winter.

I remember leaning on my elbows, rocking us until my abs burned. So fast I had double vision. She was talking in gibberish, moaning, her eyes sinking back into her sockets. Soaked in sweat.

She rose up and pushed her index finger into my mouth, along the middle of my tongue. I sucked it all the way to her knuckle, her finger practically on my tonsils. I ran my tongue along her fingernail, her ruby red nail polish. She pulled her finger out of my mouth and touched herself. I rolled us again to be on top. She opened her legs for me. I lifted her hips, slid my tongue inside.

“Yes.” She ran her long fingers through my hair. “That. Like that.”
I opened her legs more. She was hard against my tongue. I slid in deeper. *There.* Not a taste as much as a place. Bright wind cut with the finest salt. Alive, like a mouthful of fog as thunder spills the sea into itself. Strange, the words we used – *going down on a woman* – the words given to us to use. Might seem like it is all lips, and tongue, but it’s every inch of your body. How you move and don’t move. The taste. The feeling of your cheek against her thigh. Nina’s eyes were closed tight, as if she was in agony, as I looked up over her stomach. Slow motion. Time falling. Groaning. The soundtrack of pleasure, of pain. Why did I like women who tortured me? Because they would never give me everything, never let me all the way in? I wanted women to infect me. Make me pound the glass until it cracked.

“I’m going to come so hard.”

“Wait.” I jumped up and reached into the bedside dresser.

I’m not going to lie. Wearing a strap-on hit on the brakes. Stopping the action to reach for the harness and lube. Velcro. I strapped it on with Nina, though. Back in my old life. She liked it, but I needed it. She housed her many expensive sex toys and accoutrements in an antique metal box with a faded print of *The Treachery of Images* by René Magritte on it. *Ceci n’est pas une pipe.* Her chin lifted, eyes rolled back in her head as I opened her legs, lifted her hips, and slid the trophy – our code word for the massive grey silicon cock, the Cadillac of all sex toys – inside her.

“Fuck, yeah.” She smacked my thigh hard. She slapped me again and the pain sang down my leg. “Give it to me.”

I rolled us so she was on top of me. A storm of her hair fell into my face. Her necklaces dangled against my chin. I planted my feet flat on the bed, propped myself on
my elbows for leverage. One corner of the fitted sheet popped off. A naked woman straddling you, muscles tense in her stomach, riding you as you run your thumb along her. Both of you ripping at each other. Wanting it so bad you thank God to be alive.

Nipples so hard they could crack a tooth. Naked except our jewellery and manicures. Gold chains and earrings. Nail polish the crimson scream of a fire truck.

“Wanna pray?” I asked.

“You are depraved,” said Nina with her eyes closed, “and it’s turning me on.”

“I’m serious,” I said. “Pray with me.”

“Shut up.”

I flipped her over. She was underneath me again, her arms around my neck. The Velcro was coming loose around my hips. I readjusted it, pulling the side straps so tight they sliced my skin. I leaned on my elbows, rocking us until my abs burned. So fast I had double vision. She was talking in gibberish, moaning, her eyes sinking back into her eye sockets.

She rose up and pushed her index finger into my mouth, along the middle of my tongue. I sucked it all the way to her knuckle, her finger practically on my tonsils. I ran my tongue along her fingernail. She pulled it out and touched herself as I slid the trophy in and out. Deeper.

“Yes yes yes yes yes. There. I’m going to—”

The bedframe buckled. We tumbled to the edge as the right side of the mattress dipped. We froze, swimming in sweat, then howled with laughter on the sloped bed. With my face in the crook of her wet neck, her long hair in my mouth again, I tried to catch my breath. Hearts clawing through our chests. I ran my finger along one of her gold
necklaces, a fine choker. Nina stacked books underneath the frame, even bricks, but the bed never gave her a good night’s sleep after that.

Like a ringmaster of my own circus, I tortured myself with memories of Nina and me – the old me – for an hour. Two hours. I wrestled with the closet door handle and lathered myself up with the images. I was stuck in a closet. Again. The tomb of a small room. The torment of irony. A closet was designed to be discreet. Perfect for keeping someone or something hidden. Out of sight. Why couldn’t I learn my lesson? I had the power to let go, to stop tying myself into knots. When I joined the Order, I made a choice to free myself. I was not powerless. I had to get myself out. I hunched over, pressed my palms against my upper thighs, and screamed into the darkness.

Then I felt something. In the front pocket of my Guild-issued black trousers I felt it – my favourite guitar pick that I thought was lost forever. I slid it between the door and the frame, and bent it the opposite way, forcing the lock to go back. The pick was short but the right balance of pliant and stiff. I would have used a credit card, but I gave mine up when I joined the convent.

I leaned against the door and tried again. Pushed all of my weight into it while bending the pick. Just when the pick was about to snap in half, the lock popped open. Amen. I ran out.
Friday morning, after hardly sleeping, I ducked into the school’s mailroom. Officer Smith, AKA Smitty, was already standing guard in the west wing. I gave him the stink-eye as I walked past. I ran to Sister Augustine’s office after morning Mass to tell her about my closet ordeal.

“Are you sure it wasn’t a wobbly old doorknob giving out on an old door in an old school?” She hugged me tightly. I didn’t want her to let me go.

“I’m sure. I heard it lock when I was on the ladder.”

“We will pray and weather this storm together. We can celebrate our resilience at the Catholic Schoolteachers’ Convention soon.” Before I could make a face in protest, she said: “We are still attending the convention. It’s more important than ever that we stand tall. I’ll hear no pushback.” She smiled.

Sister Augustine, always smiling, always stern. Too hard sometimes. Her virtuosity insufferably. But she needed to be tough as Mother Superior. What drew me to the Sisters of the Sublime Blood – besides the fact that it was the only convent in North America that considered my candidacy as an aspirant – was its mission statement: to be a life-giving presence in a fractured world. Sister Augustine tried to keep one foot in tradition but her eyes on the future. As a loud, out, unashamed lesbian, I never thought they’d accept me. But she made me feel welcome. To a point. The gloves would never feel seamless. Think religion is bullshit? Join the club. I thought that too, even as a believer. But I needed to atone. After what happened in Brooklyn three years ago, happiness took on a different meaning. What I needed was a way to make all the
contradictions of my life fit. And God made it fit. It seemed to work in New Orleans, a city where magic and trauma and institutional racism all coexist. If it’s not a hurricane washing us to the Gulf, or the criminalisation of black youth, it’s buck moth caterpillars dropping from trees. Fire ants and termite swarms. Marsh monsters trying to reclaim their land. New Orleans, the city between life and death. The place of music, miracles, and curses.

In the school mailroom I sighed as I read Sister Therese’s name on her mail slot. In the chaos of the fires and murders, no one had thought to remove her name. The dead ask so little of us, and we can’t even get it right. Her shelf overflowed with envelopes and student papers. Her funeral had been planned by her next of kin – her nephew, Darren. None of the Sisters had even met the nephew before that week. He was in and out of town in less than two hours.

My mailbox was also full, but immediately I knew something was wrong. All of the envelopes that were addressed to me – including a letter from Gabe – were ripped open.

I walked briskly to the staff lounge, one of the few spaces left with a landline phone. I dialled Riveaux’s office. It rang four and a half times before she answered.

“Uh, Magnolia Rrr...”

“I need to talk to you. Can you meet me at school?”

“Who is this?”

“Don’t fuck with me,” I whispered.


She sounded drunk. Or half-asleep. Her words were punctuated by long breaths.
“Come to school. I need to talk to you.”

Rosemary Flynn walked into the lounge with her fine teacup, ruby lipstick screaming on the porcelain lip. She waved in my direction, like she wanted to talk to me. Odd.

“You need something?” I asked Rosemary who smoothed her pencil-skirt. She walked towards me, a quizzical look in her eye.

“What?” asked Riveaux.

“Sorry. Talking to a colleague. Please swing by,” I pleaded with Riveaux. “I need to talk to you before we leave for our stupid conference tonight.”

“What the hell? I have to be on campus anyway. I’ll be there at 9 a.m.” Riveaux groaned. “Copy that?” Her voice was subdued and distracted on the other end of our connection. “If y’all are not outside your convent at 9 a.m., I’m leaving.”

“No need to worry, I—”

She hung up.

From across the lounge, near The Big Read poster about the Book of Judith, I heard Rosemary sigh. She usually irritated any other teacher within earshot. She lamented the quality of student work (unexceptional), and the heat to which she could never acclimatise (barbaric), despite the fact that she was a New Orleanian, born and raised in the Seventh Ward.

Riveaux’s piece-of-shit truck rolled up to the convent at exactly 9 a.m. “Get in.” Sweat beaded on her forearms.

I opened the passenger door and slid in. It was broiling, hot enough to barbeque shrimp. Mouldy and musty air. Did she leave her windows open during every rainstorm?
“Good morning to you too,” I said.

The sound of Riveaux’s fire department radio changed from audio snow to mumbling. Then mumbles to words. “Dispatch to 45,” said the deep voice on the radio.

Riveaux sighed, hit the radio button with her right hand. “45 here.”

“ABT 289,” the radio voice said. “70114. We have a female on the side of the road with the 289.”

“Repeat,” Riveaux said, “289 scene coordinates.”


Repeat: *live fire.*”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Get out. There’s another fire.”

“Lord have mercy. Let’s go!”

“Out!”

“45,” said the radio voice. “Confirm your coordinates.”

“Fuck this.” Riveaux flicked her cigarette out of her open window.

Before I got the chance to buckle my seatbelt, Riveaux sped down Prytania Street and cut a sharp right. She exhaled a cloud of grey smoke into the fast air. “You’re in the thick of it now. Behave yourself at the scene.”

“Maybe we’ll get something done for a change.”

“What the hell was so important that you had to tell me in person, anyway?” She wiped sweat from her earlobe. A green parrot flew past the windshield, a neon zag.
“All of my mail was opened.”

“It was probably a mistake. Don’t get paranoid.”

“Every piece of mail? Prince is fucking with me. Or Sister Honour is trying to intimidate me. Opening another person’s mail is illegal. We should report this.”

“We?” she laughed. “We got other priorities at the moment.” St Charles Avenue unfolded quickly beneath the pickup truck. The black trolley cables gathered into high webs over the shady intersections we sped through. “Who else has regular access to the mailroom?”

“Everyone.”

“Right, right.” She rubbed her right eye.

“Teachers?”

“Yes.”

“Janitors.”

“Yes.”

“Students?”

“Sure. When the deliver late homework or assignments, which is all the time.”

“So we have established that literally everyone at Saint Sebastian’s has access to the mailroom. You’ve missed your calling. Should have been a gumshoe not a nun.”

“I’m exactly where I need to be. Part of this crime-solving dream team right here.”

“Nightmare team.”

I was surprised by my reflection in the truck’s steamy passenger mirror. Next to Riveaux I looked like a carnival freak. Her plain blue jeans and white blouse were soaked
with sweat. Perfume viles rattled on the floor. She had a broad forehead and strong nose, like the profile on a Roman coin. And smooth, dark, clear skin despite her cigarette addiction. I was a mosaic of puzzle pieces that didn’t fit but snapped together anyway. Gaping holes here and there.

We drove past an apartment for rent – “2-BDRM, 1-BTHRM, NOT HAUNTED” – and a charm parlour. “Oddities and Eccentricities. Love Potions on Sale: $5.”

We turned onto Oak Street, where Riveaux slowed down slightly. Trees dripped soft grey moss. Strings of coloured lights swung in the breeze over an empty outdoor café. A mourning dove cleaned its taupe wing on the top of a cigar store sign. Oak Street was usually busy. Any given day of the week it would be crawling with pedestrians of all ages, but since the fires, the city felt subdued. Like the hours before a hurricane, people hunkered down, stayed inside.

In a three-block stretch we sped by two potion apothecaries, a birdseed store, an oyster house, and two po-boy shops. I had eaten a po-boy only once in my three years in New Orleans – nuns had no money nor use for excesses such as cell phones or tampons or cars or eating outside of the convent.

As we drove through the red light, I saw the first pedestrian of the day. A man in a white cowboy hat and oversized denim overalls walked in front of our steaming car. I thought he was walking an exceedingly long dog until I realised the animal was an alligator. The grey creature, its face frozen in a smile, winked at me with one of its wet, sable eyes. It was as wild as it was tame.
“This is taking too long,” she said. Too many cars for Riveaux to make a clean pass. She turned on the car’s top-mounted siren. It blasted a few cars out of the way.

“Hotter than a billy goat in a chili patch.”

“Doesn’t bother me.”

“You complain about everything except the heat.”

“Get your air conditioning fixed.”

“What’s really going on with those black gloves anyway?” she asked.

“I’m incognito.”

“A gold tooth and neck tattoos. Real incognito. Don’t need to wear gloves in this car. Your secrets are safe with me.”

“Everyone’s got secrets, and none of them are safe.”

Riveaux dug into her pocket and pulled out a prescription bottle. She fumbled with her left hand as she tried to open it. She finally put the bottle into her mouth, bit down with her left incisor and popped the white plastic top off. She dropped one tiny pill on the middle of her tongue and swallowed it with no water.

“A bit early for ecstasy.”

She laughed. “My migraine won’t quit. I cannot believe you are in this car with me.”

“You said I could tag along if I shared dirt on what I saw and heard in the convent.”

“Dish it then.”

“There is no dirt. No one is talking but everyone is blaming each other.”

“You’re of no use to me then.”
We cut a quick right onto Magazine Street, so hard I thought I was going to tumble out of the truck I pressed the door lock for the thirteenth time and tightened my seatbelt.

Driving with Riveaux gave me whiplash, but the severity of it was divine. I closed my eyes as my heart sped up. Riveaux cranked the car’s speed to sixty. The siren wailed.

Sixty to sixty-nine miles per hour. Hot bile at the back of my throat. Palmed my crucifix. *Hail Mary, full of grace.*

Riveaux parked hastily, twenty feet behind fire engine #72 that was painted with an American flag on the back.

A billow of smoke sliced the turquoise sky in half. In front of fire engine #72 on the left side of Tchoupitoulas Avenue was a burning school bus. In black letters on the side of the classic yellow bus were the letters spelling “Saint Sebastian’s Catholic School.”

“Tasty.” Riveaux ran to four NOFD colleagues in helmets, bright green suspenders, and black fire coats. They ran with orange fire hoses from engine #72, a supply engine with a water tank. There were no hydrants nearby. “Where’s the driver?” she asked. “Students?”

“Driver’s with our EMT. No kids on board. She said it started in the back of the bus as if by magic.”

No injuries. “Thank you, Lord.” I blessed myself and kissed my hands to the sky. Fire raged through the two rear windows of the bus. It was eating a hole through the metal roof.

*Thump.* Two tyres on the bus’s left side blew loudly, causing the vehicle to teeter.
As three firefighters pounded the blaze with water hoses from east, west, and south, fire and smoke poured through the passenger door of the bus. Fire dripped out of the door onto the asphalt and grass of Tchoupitoulas, like magma.

Headlights shattered. I stared at the bus’s circular reflector light. I saw my reflection double in the orange reflector, like a giant amber eye, before the heat cracked it in half.

Another eruption. The front right tyre exploded.

“He’s a goner,” a firefighter said to Riveaux. “Get her out of here.” He pointed to me: “You! Get the fuck out of here.” I moved back. He looked at Riveaux again. “If we don’t get this puppy contained in two minutes, the engine is going to explode. Want in on this?”

“Davis, I’d like nothing more.”

“Throw on the kit.”

“What are you going to do?” I coughed and walked backwards. God exists and God is good. God exists and God is good, I chanted.

“Getting in there to help my crew tame this beast.” Riveaux smiled as she suited up in a pair of the fire station’s extra boots, trousers, and black jacket. “You need to get way back. Sit with Hayden.” She looked at me, then the engulfed bus. “Yummy.”

Black smoke blew through the bus windows. Heat from the fire boiled the air.

“Riveaux, move your truck,” a firefighter yelled at Riveaux, wanting her to reverse her pickup so another engine could move into proper formation.

“Sister, move the truck,” Riveaux shouted.

She was about to throw the keys to me when I said, “I can’t drive.”
“What?”

“I can’t drive.” I coughed. “I’m sorry. I’m a fuck-up.”

“Shit, Sister. No time for this.”

Riveaux, coughing and cursing to herself, jumped into the driver’s seat to reverse her truck. Fire danced as it ripped through the back of the bus, throwing the back door sideways to dangle by one blackened hinge.

A bite of sun through the smoke cast a wicked glow on the flames. If fire isn’t possession by the Devil, then nothing is. Fire crawled without legs – a viper, a pure inhabitation of a demon force.

The bus, now engulfed in flames, wavered on the side of the road. Half a dozen firefighters in black helmets and long black coats fought the blaze, with an additional ladder truck responding. It was a bus, not a building, but the flames jumped so high they must have been visible across Lake Ponchartrain. Water penetrates but fire transforms. I placed my palm over my Sacred Heart tattoo. Like New Orleans itself, flames can destroy or nurture. Miracle or curse.

_O Lord. You have mercy on all, take away from me my sins and mercifully set me ablaze with the fire of Your Holy Spirit._

What was once a school bus was now a carcass, a battered metal frame, a burnt façade. The empty windows gaped open, making it look like a startled skeleton. The fire, insatiable, started to tear away chunks of Tchoupitoulas pavement.

“Our Father,” I whispered to myself, hoping God or my Sisters or the Sisters of Louisiana Voodoo could hear me. Could anyone hear me?
Riveaux started the pickup, but instead of moving in reverse to make room for the new fire engine, she shot forward, hard. Into the back of engine #72. Two men fell off the truck.

“Riveaux!” a firefighter shouted. “What the hell?”

Her body was flung forward, and her head struck the windscreen with such intense force the glass cracked with two intersecting, thick lines, like a cross.
Chapter 21

“Why did you gun it in ‘drive’?” I asked Riveaux in the hospital an hour after her crash.

“You could have killed your men. Or yourself.”

“I wouldn’t leave you that easily. I need to stick around and annoy you.”

“Amen. But, really, what happened?”

“Haven’t been sleepin’ much.”

“Up late making Ode du Dumbass?”

“Stick to the convent, because your sleuthing is as depressing as your comedy routines.” Her neck brace practically covered her whole face. Her glasses rested on the brown plastic bedside table.

After the crash, after being rushed to the hospital by Mickey and all her other EMT buddies, Riveaux had an X-ray, an MRI, and an abdominal examination. The ER doctors said she needed monitoring for at least forty-eight hours.

We sat in silence. She demanded to be seen by a new doctor when she realised that Dr Gorman, a young female resident, would be caring for her.

“Don’t change doctors. It’s going to delay everything.”

“I’ve known Dr Turner for years.”

We waited for Dr Turner and the radiologist’s results from the MRI. The examination confirmed a serious concussion. A subdural hematoma was still a possibility. I shivered at the sight of the mechanical bed’s remote control. The tissue boxes and rubber gloves.
I squinted and grabbed the mini Bible that lived in my handbag. “You ever read this?”

Riveaux squinted at the little Bible and laughed. “Get that away from me. Pray for me to meet a fine gentleman with a discretionary income so I can quit this fucking job and open a perfumery.”

“There is one tale I thought of as I waited outside the MRI room. You never thanked me for that, for waiting.”

“The sacrifice.”

A nurse materialised, placed her clipboard on an empty chair, and removed the neck brace gently. “Merci,” Riveaux said. She put her glasses on, readjusted her body. She looked small in her pastel blue hospital gown and big industrial bed.

“You know the whole point of the Bible?” I asked.

“Didn’t realise it had a point.”

“It’s a compass.”

“I can’t believe you’re pushing the bible on me now? I thought you were different.” Riveaux readjusted, as if trying to get comfortable.

“I am. I think everyone gets to heaven or hell in their own way. But we still have to try.”

“You’re one to talk. Nosing around where you shouldn’t be, where you have no place.” As she sipped tea from the hospital cup the steam fogged her glasses. “I’ve seen this unravel too many times to count. Stay objective. Don’t get emotional.”

“The arsonist – or arsonists – are ten steps ahead of us. I hope they don’t burn another school down when we are at the conference.”
“When y’all back?”

“Tomorrow. We’re staying overnight at the Convention Centre Hotel.”

“Bad time for a field trip.”

“Sister Augustine wants us to show the community that we are not afraid.”

“You should be afraid. We all should be afraid.”

The MRI showed no bleeding in Riveaux’s brain. The concussion meant that Riveaux had to “take it easy.” She said “yes, dear” to all of the doctor’s orders.

After Riveaux had dressed and gathered her medicines, we walked outside in the sticky heat. Rain threatened in the yawning sky. A police car rolled by.

“They’re increasing the frequency of the patrols,” Riveaux said.

The air was thickening. I hoped the shuttle was still waiting for me.

Riveaux opened the passenger door of a taxi, slid in, then leaned out of the window. “I’m going home to rest while the truck’s in the shop.”

“Tell them to fix the air-conditioning.”

“Not everything can be fixed,” she said through the window. “Some things are beyond repair.”

Detective Grogan materialised as Riveaux’s taxi’s tail lights disappeared. Sergeant Decker was nowhere in sight. “Magnolia is off in a hurry,” he said as he ran his sausage fingers through his blonde hair.

“Restless, that one.” I turned to walk back to the convent, a one-mile journey up Saint Charles in the fierce heat, when Grogan’s hand landed on my left shoulder. He spun me to face him.

“Sister, I know we have differences of opinion. Your lifestyle and all.”
I stepped back. “Lifestyle?”

“Where we all agree is that you need to stop getting in people’s way. Leave these investigations to the pros.” He moved closer. His chin hovered above the top of my head.

“The pros?” I laughed. “I don’t see ‘the pros’ doing much of anything, except wasting time.”

He flicked a piece of dust from my shoulder. His hands were like baseball mitts. “Tell me more. I’m curious about what you think, what you see.”

“Three fires in a week and a half. Two people are dead. How many more need to die before you make an arrest?”

“Why are you so fixated on this case?” His eyes travelled along my face, as if he were tracing the outline of my jawline and chin.

“Saint Sebastian’s is my school. My home.”

“I read in your file that your home is in Brooklyn.”

“What’s your point?”

He brought his hand slowly to my neck and pulled at the knot of my neckerchief. It loosened. He lifted my left hand, peeled back the wrist of my black glove. “I never did see a nun with tattoos before. And you sure have a lot of ‘em.” I jerked my hand away from his. “They everywhere on your body?”

“Yes.”

“Desecrating the body don’t seem too holy, if you ask me.” He leaned so close I could feel his breath on my head. “Ain’t the body a temple?”

“Yes. A temple that wants to adorned. Like a cathedral, with paintings and stained glass.”
“Are you stained, Sister Holiday?” Before I could answer, he said. “But I must confess that I do like this one.” He pointed to the peony under my left ear. “Nice flower. Big, juicy petals unfolding, bursting open. Would you like that, Sister Holiday? To burst open?” He smelled strongly of soap. Squeaky clean. Too clean. Like he was trying to scrub something off himself.

I tried to back away from him but there was nowhere to go. People milled about the street seemingly oblivious to the two of us. Grogan smiled. His shirt collar and tie were perfectly pressed. Up close I could see that his blue eyes were young, but his skin was leathery. Too much time in the Louisiana sun. “So many tattoos,” he repeated and touched my scarf. “Where do they stop?”

“Grogan,” Sergeant Decker said to her partner in their car as it slowly drove up. “Chief needs us downtown.”

My legs shook.

“Shame we have to cut this short.” He opened the car door and slipped in.

“Shame.”

The truth? I was stained. We all were. Every human alive. I picked up my pace as I walked away. I thought about the stained-glass of our family church. Sitting in the hard, cold wood pew, next to my mother. Mom was usually peaceful, even as she delivered her death sentence.

It happened in the family apartment. I was opening the fridge for a snack and heard my mother’s voice beyond the door.

“I’ve gathered us together to announce—”

“That you’re returning to the convent?” I interrupted her, thinking it would make
her smile.

“No.” Dad pursed his lips in anger. Gabe shook his head and made the hand
gesture of zipping his lips. “Your mother has fucking cancer,” he said as I stared at a jar
of French’s mustard.

“Jesus, Dad.” I closed the door to see Gabriel and my mom and dad, all holding
hands.

“Language.” Mom sighed with her eyes closed. Pop and Mom blessed themselves
and, in unison, rolled their eyes and muttered a quick prayer of forgiveness under their
breaths.

We sat down and listened to the details. I remember Gabriel leaking stoic tears
into his beard and the collar of his flannel shirt. He wiped his nose with his sleeve.

Mom said she had popped into her doctor’s because of what she thought was an
ulcer. Too many spicy takeout dinners? But after a scan, three weeks of prodding, poking,
an MRI, she learned she had stage-four pancreatic cancer.

I didn’t know where the pancreas was. Mom was fifty-six years old, a former
Immaculate Heart of Mary nun, and by all accounts healthy. By all accounts a saint. Sure,
she made me and Moose hold soap bars in our mouths when we cursed, my front teeth
sinking into a slippery white slice of Dove as a symbol of defiance. She shipped us to a
woodland Catholic summer camp, the Catskills equivalent of a Siberian gulag, but she
did what she did for us. Mom was a drill sergeant parent to keep us safe from the
madness of New York. She once broke up a knife fight on the subway with her bare
unmanicured hands. She once ran into a burning apartment to save an older neighbour’s
photo album. How could my mom of all people in this world get cancer? Somebody had
got it wrong. Did God get it wrong?

I needed to know why. It was easy to dent the kitchen wall. I hit it twice. Then I folded at the knees, like genuflecting at the altar, and sobbed. Kohl eyeliner melted down my cheeks. Mom put her arms around my waist. Moose and our dad, both used to my histrionics, continued talking at the table.

“Holiday, I need you to be strong.”

Tears streamed out of my eyes. I pushed my mother’s hands away. Mom touched my inked knuckles, covered in white dust from punching the plasterboard.

Mom had three months to live. From Nothing Is Wrong to Three Months Left.

She tried to calm me. I had crumpled into an inconsolable puddle on the floor.

“Don’t touch me,” I warned.

Mom was dying and I had no idea how to feel, how or tell her that I loved her. My identity was defined by selfishness, insubordination. Who would I be without my mask? Who was I to begin with?

Mom named me Holiday as a reminder. We were sacred. Every day alive was a gift. I never felt worthy of my name, even though I prayed. Every single day I prayed. In secret. I had tattooed my own palms with stigmata. Stick and poke, the way they do in prison. I felt the power every time I uncurled my fingers.

I left my parents’ apartment in a rage. Moose pleaded with me to stay but I descended the stairs, two at a time, into the dark glue of night. I wanted the wet cold of it, the dark of it, to swallow me. I unlocked my bicycle and rode home, weaving recklessly through tangles of traffic.

The month that followed was a fog of calls and plans. Meals of plain white rice
and clear broth from the Chinese restaurant on the corner. Pop and I were scrambling, arguing. Moose screamed at me in the kitchen then tearfully apologised at least once a day. We shopped in bodegas at all hours for odds and ends. No one was sleeping except for Mom, who slept longer and longer. Then one day she stopped getting out of bed entirely.

After Mom fainted for the second time in one day, about five weeks after “the news,” she went quiet. Moose and I took her to the doctor. At night, we made her favourite comfort foods, hoping the smell would snap her back into herself. We brewed pot after pot of strong coffee. Pancakes and fried eggs for dinner. We cooked steak with butter in the cast-iron skillet. We made lasagne with the tiny meatballs she loved. Massive bowls of spaghetti and sausage with garlic bread, extra crispy, extra butter. She didn’t eat. She was hollowing out.

“She’s forgetting who she is,” I whispered to Moose near the sink as he washed dishes and I dried, “and who we are. It’s like everything that made Mom Mom is vanishing. I want to take her to my favourite bar. Jazz things up a bit.”

“Don’t be dramatic.” He was losing patience. “Here.” He handed me a wet salad bowl. “Dry.”

That was the day before the car fire. The flames that took her life. The accident I had caused. It has passed, it is the past. But the memories are close, too close, stitched into me like thought tattoos. They breathe back to life when I pray.
Chapter 22

The campus dusk-to-dawn curfew was in effect. Unlike Grogan himself, the curfew made me feel safe. Any building on our campus – the east, west, or central wings, the convent, the church, the rectory – could burn at any moment.

Despite the high alert and the curfew, Jack and Sister Therese’s deaths, the vultures at the sidewalk shrine, the police patrols, the annoyance of news trucks, and Riveaux’s accident, the Saint Sebastian’s delegation was still expected to attend the Louisiana Network of Catholic Schoolteachers’ Convention. It would convene for its annual conference in downtown New Orleans. Fires or not, we would represent the diocese and the school. It would be a day and a half of seminars, prayer circles, and lectures on how to keep Catholic education alive and combat dropping enrolment.

Sisters Augustine and Honour, John Vander Kitt, Rosemary Flynn, and I were required to attend. All the whining in the world couldn’t free me of the obligation. If Sister Augustine requested it, we complied.

“We will represent Saint Sebastian’s with pride,” she said with a smile in the faculty lounge. “Pack extra, Sister Holiday.” She pointed to my hands, the reminder to bring a second pair of black gloves.

The delegation was scheduled to drive downtown on Friday at 11 a.m. Riveaux’s little joyride and concussion made me late by two hours. Back at the convent, I washed my face and tied a clean black neckerchief over my throat, pulled on my gloves, and threw my duffle bag over my shoulder. I went to retrieve my purse, but I couldn’t find it. It was not at the foot of the bed where I had left it. I looked under the bed. Nothing. Not
on the windowsill or desk. Finally its familiar shape caught my eye. My purse was on top of my dresser. I hadn’t left it on the dresser. Either I needed coffee, or someone had moved my things around when I was in the bathroom. Or I was losing my mind.

Before climbing onto the shuttle, which idled in front of the school, I crossed the street and ducked into church to bless myself with holy water. I needed the reset after Riveaux’s close call. I was surprised to see Prince talking to Sister Augustine near the church altar. BonTon stood by Prince’s side. Sister Augustine waved to me.

Snippets of their conversation carried to the back of the church.

“Good to see you back where you belong,” Sister Augustine said to Prince. “Back at church.”

“She makes me feel like a fucking criminal,” Prince said.

Did he mean me?

Sister Augustine, who never usually petted BonTon, bent down to pat her white head. “You are in control of your life, Prince. You are making choices even though you think life is happening to you. Choice after choice after choice – you are in control.”

I dropped a guitar tuner as I stood in the doorway listening. BonTon turned her head in my direction and barked. Prince flicked his lighter on and off. “This school is killing me. You said it would be different here.”

Sister Augustine sighed. “Put your lighter away. And you look tired, Mr Dempsey. Are you sleeping? Monitoring that blood sugar? No serious highs or lows? Hello, Sister Holiday,” she called out, “we are already way behind schedule. The shuttle needs to depart immediately.”
Prince walked to the middle of the church and BonTon followed, dragging her red leash dutifully. He took a seat in a pew and knelt down. I had never seen him pray before. Was he putting on a show for our principal? Or a show for me?

I smirked at Prince, whose clothes were dishevelled. He walked closer and I smelled him. He reeked of ammonia and sour morning breath, but he looked taller. His smile brightened.

BonTon barked. One fast, hard bark, like a gunshot.

“Damn, I’m thirsty,” Prince yelled.

“You need water?” Sister Augustine asked. We walked over to him.

“Prince, did you leave a dead cat at my door?”

Sister Augustine rolled her eyes.


“What are you talking about, Prince?”

“Water. It’s hot in here. It’s wet!” Sweat poured from Prince’s hairline.

“Washboard!” His eyes rolled back in his head.

“Is he drunk? He seems really wasted,” I said to Sister Augustine. “Prince, are you drunk?”

Prince’s face twitched. He fell out of the pew, onto the red carpet. BonTon nosed his face, licked his lips, then yowled so loud I had to cover my ears.

“He’s trashed.”

“It’s hypoglycaemia!” Sister Augustine’s voice cracked. “Low blood sugar! Good Lord, stay with us. Prince, stay with us. She ran to the doors and cried out: “Help! We need help in here.”
I heard a student’s voice at the door. “Hello?” Small with no echo. Must have been a freshman crossing Prytania Street when she heard Sister Augustine calling.

“Woah,” she said. “Intense.”

“Get 911! Tell them we have a diabetic emergency with a male student, aged eighteen.”

“Damn. Okay.” She dialled and on speakerphone she said, “Damn. 911! Help! We need an ambulance at Saint Sebastian’s Church. Hurry. Some kid has diabetes.”

Sister Augustine grabbed the student’s shoulders and spoke quickly. “Run across the street to the school. Tell Shelly in reception to call Prince’s mother, Joelle, immediately. Her number is on my desk.”

The student said “Okay” and ran off.

“We need his Glucagon emergency kit. He’s in shock.” Sister Augustine blinked, then said calmly, “Lord, hear our prayer. Sister Holiday, run. Faster than you have ever run. Get the insulin kit. It has a pen, and it is in a red case. It’s not in the staff lounge. It’s either in the fridge in my office or in the nurse’s office fridge. But don’t use the one that has expired.”

“What? Where is expiration date on the kit? I don’t know where it is!”

“I’ll go. No time to waste.”

“I don’t want to stay with Prince.”

“Sister, keep him awake!”

BonTon hopped and barked. She rooted her nose into the crook of Prince’s neck.

“Hold him. Pick him up.”
I crouched down. BonTon howled like mad. Sister Augustine helped me place Prince’s head in my lap. Then she ran toward the school.

“Prince,” I yelled. “Stay with us, you bastard.”

His eyes twitched, like he was stuck in purgatory. Between here and there, wherever there is. His stubble was rough on my hand as I opened his mouth to make sure he wasn’t biting his tongue. His lips were warm. Prince’s teeth were terrible. Cracked. Old fillings broken in half. Rotten breath, so sour I almost gagged. Why was I so hard on Prince? He was broken and damaged, like me. Why wasn’t the Godly path making me softer, kinder?

“Prince. Stay with us. Hail Mary, Mother of God, who is our life, our sweetness, and our hope.”

I examined his body. Tattered shirt, holes in his socks.

Sister Augustine returned with the medicine. She had run the length of the school’s west wing but she didn’t seem winded.

“He’s almost out.” I put my ear on his heart and heard a faint beating. “Prince.”

His head was still in my lap. “What do I do with the syringe?”

Sister Augustine opened his eyes. His eyeballs were milky. “I’ll do it. We need a clean injection site. Check his stomach.” She opened the plastic red kit, removing the needle and vile of insulin.

I leaned down, lifted his shirt, but his stomach was a networked of scars. Cross-hatched. He was a cutter, apparently. Or he let the dog scratch the hell out of him. Masochistic fun. Pleasure-pain. I knew it well.

“His stomach won’t work.”
“Try his buttocks, or his thighs.”

I unbuckled Prince’s belt, rolled him on his side in my lap. His face was pressed against my breasts. BonTon watched quietly, with intense focus. I pulled down his filthy pants so Sister Augustine could inject his butt cheek. It had been three years since I had taken anyone’s clothes off, and it had to be Prince Dempsey? Sister Augustine inserted the syringe into the vial and carefully withdrew its liquid. She injected him on his right cheek. I applied pressure to the site for a moment, then we rolled him back over in my lap, pulled his pants up. I cradled his draping body. I held him, prayed over him. *Hail Mary.*

His eyelids pulsed. The medicine was working. BonTon barked and barked.


BonTon yelped, licked his forehead. She panted, dug her nose into his ear. She licked his cheek so hard she pushed his head off of my lap and onto the ground, where it landed with a thud.

“Shit.”

“Owww,” said Prince with his eyes still closed.

“Praise Jesus! Sister Holiday. Praise.” Sister Augustine had tears in her eyes. “We did it. Thank you, Lord.”

The EMTs, now familiar faces to me by that point, had arrived.

Sister Augustine told the medics the details of the insulin. “Ten minutes ago, he got confused, numb, and he passed out. I don’t think he’s eaten all day.”

“Roger,” said the medic.

“Where am I?” Prince asked.
“At school. You will be just fine,” Sister Augustine said. “Amen.”

The EMTs carefully loaded him onto a stretcher and took him to New Orleans City Hospital.

“BonTon?” he whispered as they rolled him out of the classroom.

“She will be by your side at every turn.” Sister Augustine handed BonTon’s leash to a medic, then she pivoted to me and said, “Sister Holiday, praise be. You saved Prince.”

“Don’t tell him. He’ll never forgive me.”
Chapter 23

With Prince’s saliva still on my fingers, I boarded the shuttle bus to the New Orleans Convention Centre. I sat behind Rosemary Flynn, her strawberry-blonde hair wrapped in a tight topknot. John Vander Kitt sat behind me.

“I think Prince is fucking with his own medicine.” I said to whomever was listening. I could not help but scan for subtext. Prince exploded regularly – gave new meaning to the word ‘irritability’. He dipped and spiked too much in the past month. Far more frequently than in the time I had known him.

“What makes you think that?” Rosemary asked.

“He’s up and down too much.”

“That’s unfortunately the nature of the disease,” said Sister Honour. “Bless his malcontent heart. And, Sister Holiday, while you fancy yourself the school sleuth, you’re no doctor, so leave it alone, if you’re capable of such a sensible thing.”

“John, may I borrow your phone?” I scraped my hands again on my black trousers.

“Sure.”

“Log into the social media so I can spy on our students.”

“The social media.” He laughed. “Sure.” John’s hands trembled slightly as he scrolled through pictures of his son and daughter on his Facebook wall.

“Why are your hands shaking?”

“I graded so many papers waiting for you. A cramp in my right hand like you would not believe.”
“Oh.” I wondered if he was developing Parkinson’s or something. I hoped he trusted me enough to tell me.

“A lot of faces,” I said as we looked through his social media pages.

“I’d know nothing about my kids otherwise.”

“Sad,” sighed Rosemary, her red lipstick holding the red glow of tail lights from one of the few cars on the shadowy street.

“Show me Prince’s Facebook page. I want to see what he’s up to and what he has been up to. Maybe we can catch him in a lie.” My sudden new empathy for Prince had vanished.

“Uh-oh. My phone is about to die. I’ll show you later when I can give it a good charge.”

“We all need a good charge.” Sister Augustine chimed in. “A *spiritual* charge!”

As I looked out the window, I revisited the hell of the past week and half. Three fires. Jack’s dead eyes. Prince’s unconscious body spilled into my lap. I ran through the clues, like mouthing song lyrics before a live show in my old life. Sister T’s mangled legs. One shoe halfway across the room. The air conditioner moved from the window. The melted light bulbs pointing to the corner. Gas-soaked clothing and the match. Two PRINCE cigarette butts. Shadows following me. Getting locked in the closet. Someone opening my mail, moving my purse, and terrorising me with a dead cat. The melted crucifix. Jamie and Lamont in a heap on the floor. Jamie’s blood streaming into the grass. A javelin of smoke firing out of the cafeteria window.

“Earth to Sister Holiday,” John Vander Kitt said.

“Sorry. Praying for a rewarding conference.”
“I’ll bet.” Sister Honour brought a white cloth hankie to her nose and wiped it.

She pointed her long, bony finger at me.

“Why the hell are you pointing at me?”

“Language,” said Sister Augustine from the front row of the shuttle.

“Sorry, but—”

“Ignore Sister Honour,” John whispered to me. “Focus on the positive. I heard what happened with Prince Dempsey.”

“Yeah?”

“You and Sister Augustine saved him. Proud of you both.”

“Thanks. But he’s still my prime suspect.” I cracked my gloved knuckles.

Rosemary sighed. I could tell she was listening to our conversation too. “She doesn’t know.” She directed her words to Sister Honour, full well knowing I could hear.

“Know what?” I asked.

“You’re the sleuth.” Sister Honour stifled a laugh.

“Not a very good one,” said Rosemary.

“We will all stay on high alert,” John said. “Don’t you worry. Now let’s sing.”

“That’s the spirit,” Sister Augustine chanted. She loved to sing, but her voice, unlike her spirit or her body, had grown frail over the past year.

As we drove, I tried to stop thinking. I let the city in. Ancient magnolias. Fountained weeping willows. Sweet olive shrubs. Night-blooming jasmine. The cleanliness of the convent levelled me, saved me, but the neon of New Orleans electrified me. Coral shutters, teal steps, gold roofs. Spanish moss floated down from branches and hovered, like puffy smoke rings. Every orchid was a face. Calatheas’s blinking leaves. If
I could share my new city with someone, the experience might feel more real. But I gave that life up three years ago.

I noticed four police cars in less than a mile.

Minutes passed. It was only eight miles from the school to the centre of the city, but rush hour traffic slowed us considerably. I must have fallen asleep. Fragments of conversation between Sister Honour and Rosemary Flynn woke me. Sister Honour had moved next to Rosemary in the row ahead of me.

“Like Judith,” Sister Honour said, “so strong, so intrepid.”

“Why, yes,” Rosemary said, “I can see that.”

From behind, the women looked like cardboard cut-outs. Two heads, one veil. Sunlight made Rosemary’s red-blonde hair sparkle.

“What gives me comfort is how Judith did not know the details of how it would end, but she went bravely forth anyway,” Sister Honour said. “Trusting only in Him.”

“What I like about Judith’s story is how strategic her plan was,” said Rosemary.

“What I like,” John added from the seat behind me, “is how Judith trusted another woman. Sisterhood is powerful.”

“Amen,” said Sister Honour, her voice a gong in the droning shuttle. “Amen.”

John continued: “So committed, Judith slid the blade in, and even when she hit the bone – can you imagine, hitting human bone – she stayed on course.”

“Amen,” said Sister Augustine again. “She did what was best for the flock.”


I had my fingers inside Prince’s mouth. Practically down his throat. His saliva and cells were on my hands. I saw his scarred, filthy skin. It was enforced mercy, the act of sliding a part of my own body inside of him. He had no choice but to trust me and Sister Augustine. How painfully tender it is, to trade one’s innermost elements with a lover. We pressed and slid and sucked and gave each other our thoughts. Our saliva. Our blood. I thought about Audrey and the countless nights we gave each other our deepest parts.

I remembered one particularly delicious morning with her. After a wild night, lost in our own good time, I knelt at the foot of her bed, as if I were praying. I pulled her to me. Her legs wrapped around my waist. I rested my elbows on her thighs, pressed my hands into her lower back. “I’m going to get my shit together,” I said. “Starting today.”

She tilted her head, looked at me quizzically. Brought her hands to my face. She pressed her fingers into my cheekbones. “How was the shower?”

“Good.”

I like it when you’re clean.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

She traced my eyebrows. “In all these years, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you without make-up.”

She moved her hands along my collarbone and neck, stopping at the Eve tattoo on my Adam’s apple. She lifted my chin and turned my face right and left, silently, as if she
were a scientist trying to classify a strange new species. She opened my mouth and touched my gold canine. “Hmm.”

“What are you doing?” I asked after she closed my mouth.

“I want to see what you do when you cannot hide.”

For a few moments, she said nothing. I traced the lattice of veins in her left wrist. She touched my necklaces, earrings, nose piercing, and hand tattoos. She smoothed my wet hair.

“I should go,” she said.

I unbuttoned her jeans.

“Don’t,” she said, moving my hands away.

“Why not?”

“What is this? What are you doing?”

“Making up for last night,” I said.

“Surprised you remember anything about last night.”

“I was a bitch.” I pushed her onto her back. Her knees hovered over the edge of the bed.

“You were a total bitch,” she said and sat up. “Apologise.”

“Sorry.”

“Like you mean it.”

“I am terribly sorry. I am an epic failure.”

“Stand up,” she said.

Her tone was getting more combative, but I stood anyway.
She loosened my robe and it fell to the floor. She trailed her fingers from my sternum to my navel, over a network of overlapping tattoos. “This is why I can’t stay mad at you.”

I straddled her on the bed. She put her hands on my ribcage, then my breasts. My nipples hardened against her cold palms. “I want to do so many things to you. I don’t know where to start.”

I put my finger over her lips. “We can’t wake your roommates.” I tugged her jeans off. “Take your shirt off.”

She slipped her shirt off and let it fall to the rug. Me and Audrey, naked. We looked at each other.

“I’m mad at you again,” she said.

“Can’t make up your mind?” I followed the lines of her thigh muscles with my black fingernails.

She laughed.

“What?”

“That tickles,” she said.

“Don’t laugh. I’m trying to be sexy.”

“Stop trying to be anything. Just be yourself.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

She grabbed a fistful of my damp hair. I kissed her, put my right hand on her left cheek, my thumb resting lightly on her throat.

As we kissed, I opened my eyes quickly to look at her. Her eyes were shut tight, as if she were in agony.
“You okay?”

She laid back, her head on the thin pillow, her hair an electric contrast to the old dull-grey sheets. I kissed her stomach then opened her knees. She closed her eyes. I pressed my thumbs on her hipbones. Her skin was taut where bone met muscle. I slid my tongue inside her, on her. She tasted elemental but new. Like minerals forming. Like late summer dusk. Night rain at the edge of the slate city. All strange power and mystery. She curled her left hand into a fist, bit her thumb knuckle to stay quiet.

Audrey was hard and soft against my tongue. I moved slowly, starting and stopping. I wanted it to hurt, for both of us to suffer in that sublime way. To take her to the cliff, leave her there for a while, then hurl us over. Her taste changed, from a deeper place inside her, from salt to living metal, like graphite licked off the palm after drawing. With my tongue still on her, I slid two fingers inside, felt her contract and pulse as she came. The tremors across her entire body made her seem possessed.

I recall the softness of her skin as I rested my face on her stomach. I let her pulse burn into my cheek. The abdominal aorta pumps as the heart beats, like a secret heart. But every heart is a secret. Something nested inside that would never reveal itself or its shape or how it works or what it’s really thinking.

We lay like that, Audrey breathing, us saying nothing, not looking at each other in the eyes, until the streetlight blinked off. The morning – bike bells, clicking high heels, beeping cars – ramped into high gear. Harlem sunrise loved to bounce off mirrors and windows of the apartment buildings. A light show. Swords of morning reflected on the old posters and pictures hanging on Audrey’s walls in her artful bedroom. In New
Orleans, in my spare bedroom, adorned with no mirrors, no pictures, no icons from the modern world. Nowhere to hide, except in plain sight.
In the sprawling New Orleans Convention Centre, Rosemary and I walked the long, empty blue corridors to the registration hall. In front of us, three young women stood in bright gold GOD’S GUIDES T-shirts.

Our conference badges were attached to bright orange lanyards. The GOD’S GUIDES girls handed us convention programmes outlining our upcoming activities.

I threw my nametag into the trash. “I’m not wearing this. It clashes with my outfit.” I could only see three letters – day, of Sister Holiday – peek through the refuse. The other letters were obscured.

“Here for five seconds and already ruining it.” Rosemary tightened her strawberry-blonde topknot.

I itched for a cigarette but continued with Rosemary on the tall escalator to the hotel check-in.

A voice channelled through the PA system: “Welcome, y’all, to the annual Louisiana Network of Catholic Schoolteachers’ Convention.” I laughed, causing Sister Honour to grimace. The voice continued: “Snacks, non-alcoholic beverages, and prayer will be in abundance at the welcome reception in the Evangeline Ballroom.”

The old convention centre carpet was patterned with triangle clusters, as brown as dried blood.

Because of our tragedies and the campus curfew, Sister Augustine wanted the Saint Sebastian’s delegation to show strength and focus. In every panel we attended and every prayer circle we joined, we were to “stand tall.” Sister Augustine insisted we all
stay overnight at the Convention Centre Hotel, just like every other school travelling in from all corners of Louisiana. Sister Augustine had booked our rooms on Friday.

“I’m sorry but this is a mistake. Check again, please,” Rosemary said. I shifted my weight from my left to right side then placed my bag on the ground. We were waiting to check into our rooms before the welcome reception.

“What’s the hold-up? Requesting the penthouse suit, your majesty?” I asked. All I wanted to do was go home. Pray and sleep. I moved out of line and walked over to the water fountain near the reception desk. In the dark basin I watched my reflection shake as ripples bent my image. Even my reflection was warped. Rosemary turned around and glared. Her fringe was so uniform, stiff as a saw. I returned to my place in line.

“Sorry, Miss Flynn,” said the receptionist. “The hotel is fully booked. Actually, we are overbooked for this convention. Thanks to your campus curfew, folks are a bit shaken. I’m sure you can understand. You will be sharing room number 1247 with, er, Sister Holiday Walsh.” Text reflected in her glasses as she scrolled on her computer and read the details of our reservation. “Twelfth floor of the Gulf Tower. Elevators are behind the reception desk and to the left.”

“I might as well just go home.”

“Can’t do that,” Sister Augustine said from the middle of the line.

“Can’t you check again?” Rosemary pleaded. “I can pay for a room if it is more expensive.”

Sister Augustine bounced from the middle of the line to the front. “Why delay, ladies? We don’t want to miss the solidarity rally for Saint Sebastian’s in the Evangeline.”
“We have a problem,” Rosemary said.

“Why is there always a problem with you two?” The back of Sister Augustine’s veil looked to me like a graceful fin that guided our way forward with certainty. Our principal never lost her composure.

“They made a mistake. They have room 1247 booked for Sister Holiday and me,” Rosemary said. A line of sweat collected on her top lip.

“Yes, indeed. Sister Honour said you two would make good bunkmates seeing as we have the campus curfew. We have to double up here this year. I’m with Sister Honour. Mr Vander Kitt’s solo.”

“God wants us to face our challenges today. Why wait? It is part of our healing from the trauma of the fires and losing Jack and Sister Therese. Why not confront whatever obstacles exist between you and Sister Holiday now, hmm? Stress is the mind resisting what it is. This is the perfect time to ask for His radical grace. To review. To renew.”

“Fine.” Rosemary ripped the key card from the clerk with a tight smile. “Thank you, ma’am.”

She turned to look for me, but I was already in the elevator repeatedly pressing “door-close.”

I shivered in the Evangeline Ballroom. It was, like most venues in New Orleans, save for Saint Sebastian’s, remarkably over-air-conditioned. It was one of the rare occasions when I was glad to wear gloves and a scarf. After a prayer for the victims of the fire and a brief
welcome address, the conference band took the stage and Catholic teachers from across the state of Louisiana moved in time with the music, gold lanyards dangling from their necks like leashes. John Vander Kitt danced sloppily and bit his bottom lip as he swayed to a rock version of “Ave Maria.” He stumbled twice, tripping over his long shoelaces.

The band was terrible. Missed the timing on every cut. Buried every hook. Butchered the rhythm.

The music had stopped but Sister Augustine continued to dance.

“Who knew that Ave Maria could be played as a rock-and-roll song,” Rosemary said to Sister Augustine, who was also dancing in front of the stage. Rosemary stared at me, her ruby lipstick a welcome contrast to the pastel décor.

“If you set the intention,” Sister Augustine said as she spun, “everything can be worship!”

“Not everything,” Rosemary said. “Obviously.”

I watched the lead guitarist tap his foot in time with the song. I was jealous. I wanted to be on stage, strumming. Jamming. It was a fun but simple beat I could have taught myself to play in twenty seconds. I liked being Holiday. I loved being Sister Holiday. But with a guitar in my hands – electric or acoustic, it didn’t matter – I was the truest version of myself

Sister Augustine bopped her head and tried to spin Rosemary, who, though so much like her in her tall willowy stature and vintage looks, stiffened at her touch. “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.”
At 11 p.m., Rosemary and I took the elevator together in silence to room 1247. Rosemary said, “You better not snore. I didn’t bring earplugs.”

“I don’t snore.”

“Good.”

“I murder people in my sleep.”

She pretended not to laugh. “That wouldn’t surprise me.”

As Rosemary showered, I changed from my black convent-issue blouse and trousers to my black sleepwear. Old yoga pants and a threadbare black tank top purchased at the goodwill for a dollar.

I took the hotel’s radio alarm clock from a nightstand out onto the balcony, balancing it on the high ledge. I smoked Riveaux’s cigarette as I rotated the dial until I found something decent. In that audio sea of Radio Country shit I needed something with teeth. “Minor Swing” by Django Reinhardt. Anything gravelly. Anything in the minor key spoke to me. The B-side. The deep cut.

Twenty minutes later, Rosemary hovered at the balcony’s open sliding doors. She pressed her damp red-blonde hair with the white hotel towel. Even when wet, Rosemary Flynn’s hair was perfectly in place.

“Smoking is passé. So are tattoos.” She pointed to my inked neck and knuckles. She looked at me. “Classy,” Rosemary said as she noticed my bicep, which revealed the list of women’s names that I had dated in ink and that had long since been crossed out:

Nina
Audrey
Autumn
Kendra
Katherine
Natalie

“That’s me. A class act.”

Eight minutes passed in which a block of rock hits trickled out of the echoey speakers of the battery-operated radio.

Rosemary dried her hair with the loud hotel hairdryer and changed into a matching long-sleeved pink pyjama suit with pearl buttons. She walked to the balcony entrance, saw I was still there, then walked back inside. “This air conditioning is oppressive,” Rosemary said, “I’m going to—”

“What?” I asked from the balcony. “I can’t hear you.”

“I turned the AC off. It’s freezing in here.” She popped her head through the open balcony door. “Can you move over? I need fresh air. I have goosebumps.”

I moved a few inches to the right.

“Move over more.”

The night sky turned blood orange. Rosemary and I sat back to back on the balcony looking in opposite directions at New Orleans. We didn’t lean our weight into each other, but I could feel her heat emanating through her pyjamas.

From twelve floors up on a muggy night, New Orleans hardly looked like a city. The edges of the skyline were blurred in smudgy shadows. Just pulses of colour remained, like Mom’s MRI scan. The Mississippi River was like a geologic vacuum pulling all light into it. I peered through the balcony slats to the lower balconies and ground below, the hedges too dry to cushion a fall. The wind picked up. I counted the
wind gusts in three-four time. Strange, how rhythm and melody follow each other, nag each other like body and shadow, like Sister Holiday and Holiday Walsh. They were separate entities now. Long-lost twins.


“You turn it off,” she said.

“You’re closer.”

“No.” She demurred.

“Reach up and turn it the fuck off.”

Rosemary harrumphed. She reached up to rotate the dial, but as she stood, she knocked the radio over the ledge and it fell to the ground, shattering on impact. “Oh no. Oh damn!” Rosemary shouted, then covered her mouth theatrically. “Sorry for cursing.” Her pink pyjama suit was striped with the orange and gold of the neighbouring hotel’s tower lights.

“It’s okay.” I blinked, stood, and looked over the ledge, at the twelve stories below. “No one’s down there. It didn’t take anyone out.”

“I could have killed someone! Somebody could have died.”

“Nothing is dead except a cheap radio and a lame tune.”

Rosemary exhaled loudly and rubbed her temples. She sat down again and, unlike before, she leaned into my back with her back as she hugged her knees. We were both barefoot, back to back.

“Are you having a horrible time?” I asked.

“I should be grading AP exams.”
“It’s Friday. Take a night off.” I let more of my weight relax into her back. She did the same.

“Monday comes around quickly.”

“Where did you grow up again?”


“I wanted to be an artist. A musician. Now look at me.”

“I hate art.”

“Maybe you don’t get art and you think you hate it because you don’t understand it,” I said.

“Like religion.” She eased more of her heat and weight into me. I wondered what she was looking at.

“It bothers me when people write something off because it might be new to them.” I leaned forward to hug my knees. Sweat dripped under my breasts, over my DEIFIED and Sacred Heart, down my stomach. The air swirled with murky heat.

“You sound like Sister Augustine,” she said.

“Don’t say that. Though she’s been a rock for me.”

“For all of us,” Rosemary said.

“Since the fires started, and Jack and Sister Therese passed,” – I made the sign of the cross – “Sister Augustine has been helpful. Prayer circles, rallies, press conferences.”

“I know. Two hundred people showed up this afternoon to the We Are Not Afraid rally. Luckily it ended before curfew. Sister Augustine organised it before we left.”

“Two hundred? Wow. How do you know we had that many?”

“John’s daughter called him. Sister Lourdes and Bernard Gregory were the
emcees.”

“Good for Bernard. He needs more positive outlets. Two hundred people. Usually we have seven or eight people at Mass.”

“That’s it?”

“Yep. Sadly.”

“I admire Sister Augustine. Her rectitude,” Rosemary said, “and reliability.”

“She keeps us from falling apart.” I cleared my throat. “Where were you when the east wing fire started?”

“You suspect me now?” She leaned forward. The heat between us evaporated.

“Really… where were you?”

“What are you, the Philip Marlowe of Saint Sebastian’s?”

“Answer the question.”

“No.” She leaned further away from me.

“Avoiding questions makes you seem guilty.”

“Questioning me makes you seem obsessed. And ridiculous. To humour you, we all had just left the staff lounge after our Sunday meeting. You told me to ‘make it a night to remember.’ Remember?”

“I remember.” Except that I didn’t. I vaguely recall the meeting, trying not to fall asleep, then I smoked on the stoop. Then the fire, pulling Jamie out, finding Jack’s dead body, then the sight of John, Rosemary, Bernard, Sisters Honour, Therese, Lourdes, and Augustine all walking towards me in the ambulance, shortly after the fire started. It was weird that everyone was still at school after our meeting ended. Odd coincidence, though there was no such thing as a coincidence. “Where were you when the cafeteria fire
started?” I readjusted my position and sat cross-legged.

“I don’t remember.” She stood up. I turned to look at her as she rested her hands on the hips of her pink pyjama suit.

“Try to remember.”

Rosemary’s face twisted, then she looked over the railing. “I have a fear of heights. I feel it in my toes.” She looked over the railing, but her eyes were elsewhere, pointing somewhere inside of her, as if she was executing a physics calculation in her head. “I’m tired.” She stood and walked in.

At midnight, with the room lights out but with a diffuse glow from the nearby buildings and Dome parking lot filtering in through the drapes, I slipped into my twin bed. The sheets were thin but bracingly clean. A moment later, Rosemary eased into her bed. Our beds were separated by a small wooden table big enough for one lamp and one phone. We faced each other.

“It doesn’t feel safe with the balcony doors open like that,” Rosemary whispered.

“Why are you whispering? I’m awake.”

“The open doors are making me anxious.”

“I like letting the outside in.”

“Can’t you close them?”

“Fine.” I sat up with a loud sigh. “If it’s that important to you.” I moved to the balcony doors and shut them.

The light was dim and I was wearing my sleeveless top. I didn’t want Rosemary looking at my arms or to see more of my tattoos. I didn’t want her to look away, either.
I crossed my arms tightly across my chest as I walked back to bed. My crucifix fell under my top. The metal was cool against the skin of my chest. I plucked it out and laid it flat over my shirt.

―Is that a crucifix?‖

―Yeah.‖

―Can I see it?‖

―Not much to see.‖ I sat down on the edge of her bed and she sat up, a white sheet and thin blanket covering her lap. “A standard, perfect, Roman Catholic crucifix.”

She leaned in and took the metal between her thumb and forefinger. Inspected it slowly. Her fingers were cold against my skin. She closed her lips. Her heart-shaped mouth looked strange without lipstick. “Why do you wear the crucifix instead of a cross?”

“The cross is the symbol for sacrifice. One horizontal line represents doing. One vertical line for seeking. The crucifix has Jesus on it. Visual reminder of his suffering, what he was willing to endure for us.”

“Hm.” She turned it over, leaned so close I could feel her warm breath on my chin. I could smell her peppermint toothpaste and rose-scented hand lotion. She inhaled tensely.

“What?”

She leaned closer. “If I were to wear something religious, I wouldn’t wear a starving, tortured, bloody body around my neck. It’s ghastly. Offensive. It is like you’re walking around with an open wound. You don’t see it because you’re used to it.”

“It’s comforting.”
“For you?”

“Yes. For lots of people.”

“The opiate of the people.” She placed the crucifix flat on my chest, in between my breasts, on my burning Sacred Heart. Our faces were close to each other. “Religion is the opposite of science,” she said as she touched the crucifix again then traced my silver chain with her fingertip. Her skin was cool and soft. “And science is the opposite of religion. It’s an unending battle.”

“It’s not a battle.” We looked at each other. Her grey eyes were alert, awake. “Just different ways of understanding the world. And ourselves.”


“The crazies speak for themselves, not for us.” I stood. I felt her eyes on me as I returned to my twin bed. “Religious faith and scientific faith are more similar than dissimilar.”

“Why in the world are you a Catholic nun?”

“A Sister, technically. Nun and Sister are used interchangeably these days.”

“Why are you a Sister?”

“It makes sense. Redemption is the best gift you can give to a person. Like giving someone a new chance at life.” I rolled onto my back. “This is a better life for me. Thinking bigger, beyond myself.”

“What about the priests? Don’t you hate being told what to do?”
“They hardly even talk to us, but Father Reese is fine. It’s better that he’s a flatliner. We have our own projects and worship. We stay out of each other’s way. Besides, Sister Augustine has our backs.”

“You have a lot of rules in the convent.”

“Don’t scientists like rules?”

“Sure. Rules without all the shame, patriarchy, and denial. Aren’t you a feminist?”

“Of course I’m a feminist.”

“And you were gay?”

“I’m still gay,” I said.

“A lesbian Sister of the Sublime Blood.”

“And a sleuth.”

“A lesbian nun sleuth. How do you keep it all organised?”

“I don’t.”

She rolled her eyes and smiled. Her smile was magnificent. I don’t think I had really seen it until just then, in the amber light of the hotel room.

My eyes closed. My left eye still quivered. The ghost of a lit ember. “I need to do something meaningful, and shame is a good motivator for me.”

“What is shame?”

“Fear of never fitting in. Never belonging.” I rolled onto my side and we faced each other. “I need structure.”

Rosemary rested her head in the perfect triangle of her arm and hand. “Why do you hate that James Taylor song so much?”
“Fire and Rain?”

“Yeah,” she whispered.

“I don’t want to think about fire.”

“Think about something else,” she said.

“You gonna tell me where you were during the second fire?”

“No.”

I rolled onto my back. “Why are we still whispering?”

“Feels appropriate.”

“Did you leave Voodoo’s body on my doorstep?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Never mind. That would be too witchy for a scientist.” With my hands folded over my stomach, I turned my head, my chin touching my right shoulder, and looked at her. She was still on her side, facing me. My chest rose and fell. “We should sleep,” I said.

“You’re tired?”

“We shouldn’t talk right now.”

“There are a lot of things we shouldn’t do right now, but could.” She readjusted her arms underneath her head.

Though it was hard to decipher Rosemary’s expression, I could see that her grey eyes were wide open, looking at me.

Her breath paused the way it does before you say something important. But she didn’t say anything else. Neither of us did.
At dawn on Saturday, as Rosemary slept, I showered, and changed into a fresh pair of black trousers and one of my five identical long-sleeved black blouses. I brushed my hair, which, at that point, was long enough to pull back in a miniature ponytail. My black roots were visible again. I needed to bleach them soon. I let my hair air dry as I packed my bag.

Rosemary was still asleep in her pink PJs as I left our hotel room. I stopped in the lobby, picked up a warm beignet, and shook the excess powdered sugar into the trash bin. The walking path behind the hotel opened into the French Quarter. I ducked into an ally where a lush, pocket-sized park unfolded. Secret lives, secret passages hid everywhere in this city. Heat had scorched most of the grass, but a carpet fallen leaves had softened the earth. I walked to a green bench, sipped my coffee, and nibbled my beignet until the sun rose and burned off the morning fog. A group of musicians walked past. Looked like they hadn’t been to sleep yet, still drunk probably. They moved slowly, carried their brass instruments as they strolled. Where were they headed? To a cafe for strong coffee? Or a greasy spoon for biscuits and gravy or bacon-egg-and-cheese-on-a-roll and orange juice? They wore hardly any clothes. Their bodies slick with sweat. The sweet smell of clover and a storm formed like a curse over the river. Thick palm tree leaves. Low light, like water underneath a door, restless water.

I thought about Rosemary, still asleep in her pink suit in the white hotel room. Did Sister Honour make us room together to keep me distracted? She thought I was weak. Was she behind the fires? Was she trying to set me up? She despised me, but still. It didn’t make any sense.

Through the changing light I walked for an hour until our morning of seminars
and roundtables began, then we’d board the bus to Saint Sebastian’s. Beaten-up earth makes no sound. I touched a new jasmine blossom. It was small and hard in the way of a growing thing. I should have left it alone so it could grow, but I broke it off and put it into my pocket, where it would never open.
Chapter 25

After the shuttle dropped me off at the convent on Saturday afternoon, I saw a shitty red truck on Prytania Street. Riveaux. I rapped my gloved knuckles on the passenger window. She rubbed her eyes. Pressed her thumbs against her sweaty eyebrows.

I opened the door and slipped into the steaming truck.

“Satan called,” Riveaux said.

“Again?”

“He wants his weather back.”

I laughed, blinked my wet eyelashes. “Amen. Want to talk about the real reason you crashed into the fire truck?”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Do not get missionary on me. I don’t want to be saved. Even if I did, you couldn’t save me.”

“What’s your poison?” She didn’t reply as she readjusted her rear-view mirror.

“What kind of drugs are you on?” I asked.

She closed her eyes, slowly nodded. “How did you know?”

“Divine insight. You’re high right now, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I mean no.”

“Yes or no?

“Yes. Not heroin or shit like that,” she said as she cleaned her glasses.

“Sophisticated over-the-counter fineries.”
“Vicodin? Oxy? Percocet?”

“All of the above.”

Hot, sinewy air strangled me. “When did it start?”

“I fell off a ladder six years ago. I was investigating a house fire on Annunciation. Cracked a vertebra, ruptured eight discs. Needed three back surgeries.”

“Ouch.”

“ Couldn’t sleep or sit or think. The pain was like nothing else I had ever felt. It was always there.”

“Oxy blow your mind?”

“It erased my mind.”

“Sweet relief.”

“Loved my Vicodin, too. The float of it is…freedom.”

“How do you get meds after all these years? Doctors are cracking down hard on opioid prescriptions.”

“My cousin is my doctor.”

“Dr Turner?”

“Turner is her maiden name. She’s a Riveaux, and Riveauxs look out for each other. I also pay her.”

“You’re a pill-popper. So what? Candy is dandy. Could be worse.”

“I’m forgetting shit. Losing evidence bags. Forgetting to log evidence. Logging my perfumes instead of crime scene evidence. Forgetting key details from interviews. Misremembering dates. Details are everything in this work. Boss put me on notice two years ago. I started out as a firefighter, you know, but I got bounced from the FD. Hubby
sent me to rehab in Georgia. Me and every other cop or fighter worth her salt in NOLA. This job wears you down. It’s not a job for sentient beings. You can’t take anything from work back home.”

“Living two lives.”

“Yeah.” With her thumb and middle finger she massaged her wet hairline.

“I understand. How did you get back into fire?”

“A buddy got me a desk job with the department after rehab. Then I took the investigator’s exam. Without studying one day, I aced the exam. I was shocked.”

“Fire suits you.”

“Don’t know about that, but I like the work. Not as much as perfuming but, truth be told, my sense of smell is pretty shot at this point.” Riveaux lit a cigarette, took a pull.

“Rock left.”

“Who’s Rock?”

“Rockwell, my husband.” She retrieved a handkerchief from her back pocket and sopped the sweat from her forehead.

“Where’d he go?”

“Houston. Joined the force over there. Said he needed a clean break.”

“As if there were such a thing.”

“Yep.”

“Thanks for telling me all this.”

“We’re friends.”

“We are?”

“I’m absolved of all my sins now, right?”
“Let’s nail the arsonist and we will both be saved. I gotta run. Going to see Jamie in the hospital.”

Before Riveaux bid farewell and drove away, she handed me a vile of homemade perfume and a ten-dollar bill.

“For the streetcar,” she said. “Buy some new gloves. Wear the cologne. It’s sandalwood. Very mysterious. It will enhance your disguise.”
Chapter 26

Jamie was asleep when I arrived at his hospital room on Saturday night, paper bag of Popeye’s fried chicken, biscuits, and gravy under my arm. I used Riveaux’s money to buy the food. John and Rosemary were already there.

The nurses shooed us away. “He doesn’t want to see you,” said Nurse Stacy. “He needs his rest.”

“Here.” I handed the leaking bag to the nurse. “I want to make sure he had a treat.”

“Sister Holiday?” Jamie had woken up and called to us faintly. Rosemary, John, and I walked in.

“Ten minutes,” said Nurse Stacy.

“Brought you a treat.” I ripped the bag away from the nurse. “Bless you.” She rolled her eyes. I placed the take-out bag on Jamie’s side table and put my hand on his.

“How are you?” Even though he was still so weak, he jerked his hand away. “You alright?”

“No.” Jamie closed his eyes.

“Would you like us to go?” asked John.

Jamie sighed.

I read conflict in his troubled face. “What’s up?”

“I saw you.” Jamie said.

“Me? Where?”

“In the east wing, on the night of the fire.”
“You saw me when I carried you out.”

“No. I mean, you ran down the hall before the fire started.”

“What?” Rosemary pursed her lips.

“It was you, Sister. The shadow. I even told Lamont.”

“It wasn’t me. I was on the steps outside, smoking.”

“I saw you running down the hallway,” he insisted. “That’s why I started screaming when I did.”

“I swear on the Lord’s name, it wasn’t me. I didn’t do this. I heard you yelling. I saw a shadow too.”

“Who was it?”

“The Holy Ghost?”

“Why were you and Lamont in the school so late?” asked Joh.

“He was crashing there,” I replied. “Right?”

He nodded.

“Sleeping there?” asked Rosemary. “For how long?”

“A week.”

“How did you get in and out when it was locked?”

I jumped in again. “You climbed the fire escape and moved the second-floor air conditioner.”

“Yeah.” His cheeks flushed.

“And you’re sleeping at school because you and Lamont are together, and your parents kicked you out?”

“You a mind-reader or something?”
“I wish. I’m just attuned to the ups and downs of queer life.”

“Mostly downs for me.”

“Sorry.” I removed and brought my hands together to pray. Jamie stared at my knuckles: *LOST SOUL.*

“My parents kicked me out. I couldn’t sleep on Rebecca’s sofa anymore because her parents are getting divorced and her mom needed the sofa back.”

“Jamie, I’m sorry.”

“Can I sleep in the convent when I get out of here?”

“I will ask Sister Augustine. She’ll know what to do.”

“Can I crash with you guys? I’ve stayed in the shelter and it sucks. There’s no shower or washing machine. Some drunk guy said he was going to kill me and dig out my eyeballs.”

It dawned on me at that moment. “Were the clothes on the second floor yours?”

“Yeah,” he whispered.

“Riveaux was convinced they belonged to the arsonist. I didn’t think so. Please tell me you didn’t have anything to do with the fire. Was it an accident? We can tell Investigator Riveaux. She’ll understand.”

“No. The shirt and shorts in the bundle were mine. I was using them as a pillow. I didn’t want to go into the foster system. I was sleeping at school.”

“We need your mom and dad to come in and discuss this.”

“There is no discussion. My folks don’t give a fuck about me. My mother is the one who found me in bed with Lamont. She freaked. She went totally fucking nuts, crying. My dad kicked me out. He said if I went to conversion therapy, a pray-the-gay-
away camp, I could come home. That’s where Lamont is right now, at one of those shitshows. Dad called me a faggot. A disgrace. He said he is afraid of me.”

I put my hand on his arm again. “I don’t mean this to be disrespectful, Jamie, but fuck him.”

He started to cry. “Can’t I stay at the convent when I’m released? Please? I can’t go back to the homeless shelter.”

“It’s not something I can authorise.”

“I’m begging you.”

“He can stay with me,” said Rosemary. “Jamie, you are welcome to sleep on my sofa for a few nights. Then you and your parents have to work it out.”

“Okay.” Jamie beamed. “Thank you, Miss Flynn.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Thank you,” I whispered to her as we left Jamie’s room.

“It’s not for you,” she remarked. “It’s for him.”

The sky was gold-green when stepped outside. John, Rosemary, and I strolled from the hospital through the winding streets of the French Quarter to the Marigny, where the Vander Kitt family lived. We said not one word as we walked. John had agreed to drive Rosemary Flynn to her apartment in the Seventh Ward, and then he would take me back uptown to the convent.

Our route to the Marigny was spiced with night-blooming jasmine and citrus. Grapefruit, lime, and satsuma trees lined the leaf-dark streets. A crunch under my shoe. Not a piece of glass but a crayfish shell, its coral and white exoskeleton either thrown out of a window or dropped during an afternoon stroll after the meat had been sucked out of
the head. So much of what told the story of this city was out of focus. Indistinct features like vapour, demons, and spirits. Forged of the rare air in fairy tales. Unlike New York, the city where subtlety goes to die, New Orleans was all ghosts, contours. Spaces between spaces, where light and dark are neither.

We were all sweating buckets as we picked up our pace. From the courtyard of the Ordo Templi Orientis, I heard ritual sounds similar to Saint Sebastian’s morning Mass, though the Orientis hosted ceremonies of the Gnostic Mass, the Rosicrucians, and voodoo.

We moved past the open door of Josie’s, the French Quarter dive with neon-lit sci-fi posters in the window, a mosaic-tiled façade, and the jukebox that only played Frank Sinatra’s “Witchcraft” regardless of what track you selected, according to Bernard Gregory. I imagined my old self there, drinking cheap tequila with an ice-cold Abita chaser.

Crossing the palm-tree-lined Esplanade on the border of Faubourg Marigny, we walked past a brass band in green and gold suits. Their instruments shook dramatically as they convulsed with music, pumping the horns, their music practically incinerating the red honeysuckle along the sidewalk. Each boy – couldn’t have been more than twenty years old – was entranced. Even the bougainvillea seemed to kneel, enchanted with their music. Jazz is everything in New Orleans. Jazz is everywhere. But not the tidy kind where folks sit politely or stand behind podiums. New Orleans jazz is all curves and swerves. A map so twisty it can only be real. Men – and sometimes woman – strummed banjos, slapped washboards, rained sweat on piano keys, thrashed trumpets and trombones and who the fuck knows what else and it all melts together, like a thick rich
gumbo stirring together tastes that should not work, but it does, and people cannot get enough.

We passed a dim cocktail den with its doors and windows open to the light breeze. I saw two hipsters in spectacles dance to an upbeat house track.

One block away from John’s house, I heard a familiar voice. “Hey y’all.”

It was Bernard Gregory, smoking a cigarette on the buckling kerb in front of The Bomb, another dive bar on Pauger Street. The main doors were open revealing a sea of sawdust and peanut shells on the floor.

“Who goes there?” Bernard chanted.

“Hello, hello.” John smiled.

“Mi amigas!”

Bernard was wearing one of his many Ramones T-shirts, a short pair of tight, ripped black denim shorts, black socks, and black Converse high-tops. His punk attire was so much like my old wardrobe. A cruel mirror.

Bernard gave me an intense hug. Then John and Bernard kissed on two cheeks like Europeans. John, always earnest, seemed to enjoy seeing Bernard outside of school grounds. “Mr Gregory, what are you doing here? It’s going to be dark soon.”

“And?”

“Curfew.”

“Right. Damn those fires.” He tapped his cigarette against the palm of his hand. His face glistened with sweat.

“You should get going soon,” Rosemary said.

“Not yet. Stay for a minute. Let’s go inside and wet our whistles.”
“I can’t go inside a bar,” I said.

“T need to go home,” Rosemary said. “I don’t feel safe outside.”

John nodded, but said, “I think we have time for one song on that fine old jukebox.”

I shook my head. “I really shouldn’t.”

“T all the more reason you should,” said Bernard.

“If any of you breathe a word of this to Sisters Honour or Augustine, I’m taking you to confession with Father Reese.”

Rosemary shivered though the air was sticky. Bernard threw his cigarette butt to the kerb – was it a PRINCE brand? I couldn’t tell – pivoted, and walked inside. John, Rosemary, and I followed him into the bar that was dark save for strings of vintage Christmas lights. Three people argued about a score around a pool table. Two women seated on red stools leaned on their elbows, looking high.

The jukebox played “Ring of Fire” by Johnny Cash. “I like this song,” Rosemary said.

“I love Cash, but no fire references, please.”

Rosemary rolled her eyes. “Are you always so dramatic?”

“Only in your presence.”

Bernard pointed to the round wooden table where he had left his empty tumbler, sketchbook, and guitar case. The table was stained with the memories of beer bottle rings, and I thought about all of the nights and all of the women who had sat at that exact table letting beer bottles sweat while they made out near the pool table. Water sitting on wood for too long was no different from sunburn. Good reasons to lose track of time. But you
pay a price. There’s always a price.

“Something stuck in your eye?” Bernard asked. “You’re twitching.”

“Smoke.”

“You probably have PTSD,” he said. “You should get that checked out. Untreated trauma hides in the body.”

“Thank you, counsellor Gregory.”

“I’ll always take care of you.” Bernard winked at me and tapped his heart. I imagined his Judith tattoo was properly healed by now. I hadn’t even seen it. I knew it would make me jealous.

“By the way,” I asked Bernard, “did you leave Voodoo’s body for me?”

“You’re bananas.”

“Voodoo, our garden cat, was dead. On my doorstep.”

“For real?”

“For real.” I made the sign of the cross.

“Hell, no! I love fur babies.” Then, looking at John, Bernard said, “Weren’t we supposed to jam after you guys got back from the conference?”

“You play music with John? What else are you keeping from me?” I needed a way to ask Bernard about the matches in the utility closet.

“You won’t jam out with me,” he said, winking. “Mr Vander Kitt’s my consolation prize.”

“Should I take that as a compliment?” asked John who drank a vodka soda in one gulp.

It was quiet in the bar.
John and Bernard were deep in conversation about a David Bowie guitar lick. Standing at the bar, Rosemary looked like a stranger, her lipstick a blood-red splash of colour in the otherwise dim room.

She moved closer to me. “You want a physics lesson?”

“No.”

“Pop quiz: What kind of magnets are we?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Me and you. What kind of magnets do you want to be?” she asked, moving closer to me. Rosemary’s freckled left arm was close to my thigh. We were almost touching. “Do you want to keep repelling each other, or…?”

My temples burned. I could barely swallow. “Or what?”

“Or attracting each other?”

“Those are our options?”

Rosemary stared at me with her grey, unblinking eyes framed by her level fringe. She lightly touched the back of my gloved right hand with her index finger. I could feel my stigmata tattoos burning underneath. She flattened her whole palm over the back of my hand. Her knees separated enough to slide a hand between. It felt like we were the only two people in there.

She turned my crucifix over. I hadn’t realised that it was backwards.

I followed the symmetry of her legs, her narrow hips. Everything about Rosemary was austere, except her lipstick. Her manner was uptight, but a raw sexuality bubbled far below the surface. She was a deep thinker, a deep observer. I could only imagine how she would kiss, how she would moan, the sounds she would make as I unzipped her skirt and
slid my fingers down her thigh, inside her. I wondered if she would pound on the headboard or hit me. I bit down on the tip of my tongue. She removed my right glove, looked at the tattoos.

I turned my hand over, palm up, and lightly pressed the tips of my fingers on hers. Her hands were cold and soft.

She cleared her throat. My heart beat quickly. This part of me, the tidal feelings of desire, had been dormant – mostly dormant – for three years. What are three years of celibacy for a sex addict? A lifetime? How did Sisters Augustine and Honour do it?

I said, “I didn’t think you were into—”

“Nuns? I’m not, usually.”

I pulled my hand away. “Why are you single? You’re too hot to be single.”

“Who said I was?”

“Don’t tell me you’re married.”

“My boyfriend lives in Baton Rouge. Serge.”

“Oh.”

“He’s a lawyer. He defends people on death row. We see each other every other weekend.”

“I didn’t know you had a boyfriend.”

“What do you actually know about me?”

“So, you have a boyfriend and you are into women?”

“You really are out of it. I have a boyfriend *and* I date whoever I want. Serge is also transgender.”

“Good for you. Did you win a prize for being so modern?”
She rolled her eyes. “Did you win a prize for being so infuriating?”

“I want to know more about you,” I said.

“I want to know more about you.”

“But not now.”

“Why not?” Her grey stare was unwavering.

“My temporary vows are almost up. And then—”

“Then what?”

“I choose. Permanent vows or leave the convent.”

She rolled her eyes. “Aren’t you tired?”

“Of what?”

“Tired of fighting?”

“Yes.” I closed my eyes, put my gloves back on, and tightened my black

neckerchief until it almost strangled me.

“Don’t fight.” She moved closer. Her hair smelled of sea salt and wet chalk. Heat

tumbled in my chest. I was surprised and turned on by her forthrightness, but I wasn’t

blind. The truth was, there was a charge between Rosemary and me ever since the first

moment I saw her, two years ago. I was a year in, as an aspirant at Saint Sebastian’s, and

she had just started. We met on Prytania Street during a school fire drill when I was close

to fainting in the swampy July heat. Rosemary, in her pink cashmere jumper and coral-
tinted pearls, leaned against the concrete wall. White chalk dust on her alabaster hands,

presumably from a summer school physics lesson truncated by the fire alarm. She

squinted disapprovingly at me – my black gloves, neckerchief, messy black roots. I was

equally intrigued and disgusted by her costume. We said nothing. We weren’t introduced
by Sister Augustine until days later at an all-staff assembly. But when her grey eyes met mine I felt an intoxicating rush. Seduction. One of the myriad addictions I was trying to break at Saint Sebastian’s. Maybe Sister Honour decided to place me and Rosemary in the same class – in the same hotel together – to distract me. Temptation.

Even as a Sister I was still powerless with women. Sometimes I wished I were straight. It would have been easier. I had hooked up with a couple of boys – drunk and desperate. At a dark bar or after a show. Some of them were cute, lovely even, in expected ways, like a painting in a museum you enjoyed admiring. I tried to make myself crave men but it never held. I loved cock, after all. But only when it was strapped onto a hot woman or onto me. I loved fucking and being fucked hard. An extraordinary irony in a tangle of ironies that is my life – to be a lesbian who loves getting hammered. Only women could infect me. Only women could torment me. Knock the breath out of me, even with the slowest, quietest movements. Women. Their spells and shadows and big moods and heat and skin and hair and unidentifiable colognes and impossible depths. Ciphers you can’t solve are the only ones worth the time.

Rosemary and I were so close I could feel her breath on my cheek. I looked into her grey eyes and said, “We could keep it between us, I guess.”

“I want to have a secret with you.”

I wanted to bring my mouth to hers and smear her brick-red lipstick.

“Come home with me tonight,” she said as she took note of Bernard and John, who were oblivious at the bar’s edge.

“Not now. Maybe one day.”
She laughed. “One day?” The lids of her grey eyes almost closed. “La tragédie. You’re supposed to be the rebel.”

“Rebel without a clue.” I turned abruptly and ordered a drink. The bartender’s beard was long and bushy like Moose’s.

“Whaddya having?”

“Seltzer with lime. Extra ice.”

“You got it.”

“Another vodka. Hold the ice,” said John.

“Another rye Manhattan,” Bernard ordered. “Four cherries.”

“What’s a dry Manhattan?” Rosemary asked. She folded her arms tightly.


“Is it now?” asked Rosemary. “Rebel.”

“Make it a double,” Bernard told the bartender with a smile.

“Speaking of favourites, gotta go see the family unit,” John said.

“How’s Kathy?” Rosemary asked.

I swirled the ice cubes, stabbed the wedge of lime with my straw. Bright green pulp floated to the surface.

“I’ve missed three mortgage payments to buy a new ‘smart wheelchair’ for Kath. Wasn’t covered under our insurance. Alas. Me and Kath, we make the best of it,” said John. “What else can we do?”

“Right on,” said Bernard. “Right on. Keeping it positive.” He tried to give John a fist bump but John didn’t understand. Instead, John held Bernard’s closed fist with two
hands. John’s wife, Kathy, had ALS. Their son and daughter, Lee and Claire, fraternal twins, had moved back from budding careers as location scouts in Hollywood to help with Kathy’s care. John could talk a starving dog off a meat truck – he’d talk about anything – but he had a hard time talking about Kathy.

“I’ll take the women home,” Bernard said to John. “No problem.”

“I don’t think you should be operating a motor vehicle if you’ve been drinking, do you?” John said.

“I’m rock s-s-s-solid, John.” Bernard slurred. As he raised his glass to his lips, he cracked his front teeth with it.

Rosemary sighed loudly and said, “I’m calling a taxi.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No,” said Rosemary. “We’re going opposite ways.”

“Alrighty then,” John said. “I’m going to skedaddle. Sister Holiday, Bernardo – you two behave. Curfew time for Sister Holiday.” He smiled and slid his glasses, slippery with sweat, up the bridge of his nose. His white dress shirt was soaked through the armpits. I was baking in my gloves and polyester trousers, but I didn’t hate it, although I stank of musky body odour. Unlike Riveaux, I would rather be hot than cold any day of the week.

“Sister, take a cab to the convent.” John discreetly slid a twenty-dollar bill for the cab fare into my palm.

I wanted to give him a hug but refrained. John knew that I had no money. He didn’t make a big deal of it or expect a dramatic thank you.

“I will pray for you tonight,” I said.
“Pray for Kathy, not me. And Lee and Claire?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks. You’re part of the family, too, you know that?”

“The sister you never had,” said Bernard. “Get it, Sister?”

“Ha ha,” John snorted.

“Au revoir,” said Rosemary as she shuffled from our table. “My cab is here.” I couldn’t bear watching her walk away, so I turned to Bernard.

“What’s new in the zoo?” I heard the door swing shut behind Rosemary and John.

“Do you really want to know, or are you asking because you’re ministering to my sorry ass?” Bernard had eaten all four of the cherries in his cocktail and methodically lined up the cherry stems in a tidy row on his white napkin.

“Your ass is sorry,” I said, which elicited an elbow into my right ribs. “Sister Augustine does most of the ministering. But I do want to know. How are you? Something’s up with you. I can tell.”

“Dang, Sister. You really are a sleuth.” He knocked over his Manhattan as he gesticulated. The bartender gave me the Your Friend Is Cut Off look. I nodded.

“Can’t hide anything from me,” I said. “Spill it. The truth, not another drink.”

“I have a crush.”

I rubbed my palms. “Spare no detail.”

“It’s embarrassing how much I trust you. Nuns. Not all nuns, but definitely you and Sister Augustine.”

“Because of the quality of spiritual guidance we provide.” I watched the steady hands of the bartender as he filled two glasses with seltzer and placed them in front of us.
“Something like that,” he said slyly.

“Do you have a secret crush on a fine lady at the other end of the bar?”

“The dashing lady leaning on her elbows over there?” he asked.

“Maybe.”

“Ask her out.”

“Ugh. I love women with muscles like that. I want her to beat the hell out of me. Is that sick or what?” He smiled in her direction, but she was engaged in conversation with the bartender.

I knew exactly what Bernard meant. I would give just about anything to trace a woman’s bicep and feel her back muscles contract. Was there a hotter night than when Nina used my scarf to tie me to her headboard? I’d rather die than be restrained by a man, but when a woman holds you down and looks at you with hellfire in her eyes, like she wants to tear your heart out with her teeth – too good. I shut my eyes.

“Y’alright?” Bernard asked. “Looks like you saw a ghost.”

I cleared my throat, reached into my purse. “I still have the fifty dollars you lent me for the tatt, but it’s back at the convent.”

“Hold onto it. Sneak out and get inked when Sister Augustine’s on retreat.” He tapped his heart and took a sip of his seltzer. “Judith, we are!”

I put my purse down and smiled. “Maybe.”

“So do you want to know who I have a crush on? Don’t judge me.”

I nodded.

“Rosemary.”

“Rosemary Flynn?”
“I’m kind of totally obsessed with her.”

“Oh.” I rotated my seltzer glass and stabbed the lime wedge with my straw. “I thought you had a girlfriend. What’s her name again, from the school Christmas party last year?”

“Sarah. She’s amazing. I dunno. I’m not the same person I was last year. Even six months ago. Things are changing. I’m a mess. Maybe it’s a good mess. Mega meltdown at age thirty.”

“Everything went to shit for me when I was thirty. Excuse me.” I signalled the bartender. “Can you call me a taxi? I can’t walk back to the convent with the curfew.”

My mind flashed back to the matchbooks in the custodian’s closet. Was it the right time to ask, when Bernard was clearly drunk? No.

“Wasn’t Jesus thirty-three when, you know, he died?”

“Died and was resurrected. Yes.”

“You are the same age as Jesus now?”

“Yeah. No pressure.”
“What? You thought I’d be wearing a Bride of Christ sign?”

“That’d be hot, actually.”

It was Sunday, and Audrey and I hugged in the arrival area of the overly air-conditioned Louis Armstrong Airport. It had been three years since we had seen each other. Since I left Brooklyn. Since Pop drove me to the airport in his NYPD cruiser, with Moose silently staring out the back window, relieved but worried about the strange new chapter of my life. I tried to contain my excitement at seeing Audrey, but the second I saw her I ran to her. We twirled in a circle, screamed, and hugged tight.

“I’m surprised,” Audrey said. “You still look like you.” Her eyes widened as she looked me up and down. Head to toe.

“I’m still me.”

“You look like the old Holiday, sans make-up.”

Like every other day, I had worn my convent-issue black trousers, black blouse, neckerchief, and black gloves. Audrey was a masterpiece. She wore a pink leopard-print metallic body suit and a short-brimmed cap that read BUY LOW SELL HIGH. Her hair was dyed carnation pink and was long, past her shoulders, and straightened. “Only thing straight about me.” She laughed. Her make-up was heavy and flawless. I wanted her to wrap her strong arms around me. I wanted to drown in her.

She held one of my hands. “What’s with the gloves? Handling fancy artwork?”

“Something like that,” I said.

Audrey moved her hand to my right hip, leaned close, and brought her lips to
mine, but I quickly turned my face away. “Don’t.”

“Fuck. That’s cold.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Don’t say ‘fuck’? Can’t curse around you now?”

Audrey slid her gold sunglasses on. Inside the airport, with her body suit, gold sunglasses, and crazy hat, she had the X factor. She was the kind of person who stands out because they don’t give a fuck. The kind of person I used to be before I became invisible.

“Be yourself. Nothing’s changed,” I said.

She laughed and shifted her purse from her left shoulder to her right. “Everything has changed. You’re a Catholic Sister.”

“I can’t believe we’re already fighting.”

“If we didn’t care we wouldn’t argue.”

“I’m still me.”

“No you’re not.”

“Sixty seconds ago you said that I’d hardly changed.”

“I did? Oh, right.”

“Maybe I have changed. That’s a good thing. We should all be growing and evolving and changing.”

“An existential nun, too.” Audrey pulled a cigarette out of a black hard pack of cigarettes.

“I don’t think that’s the definition of ‘existential,’” I replied as I pulled up my gloves. The air conditioning was a trick. I was dreading the step into the drippy, ninety-
degree fire of the morning.

“We’re scholars now, too.” Audrey tapped her cigarette against the box to tighten the tobacco. I loved the sweet caramel cologne of fresh tobacco. The ritual of it.

“We need to cab it to your house or your convent or what? I’m assuming you don’t have a car. Do you ride a horse and buggy?”

“I knew this would be a mistake.”

She pulled a lighter out of her pocket. “I had a feeling I should stay in New York.”

“Then why come?”

“We’re playing a show at the Fair Grounds. And I wanted to see you, make sure you’re okay. You don’t call. You don’t email. You’ve ghosted me.”

“When did I ever call or email?” I turned away from a group of teenagers lounging on the airport luggage carousel. For a moment I thought one was a sophomore from my intermediate music class. They were all too tech-tranquilised to notice anything in the analogue world.

“You never text,” Audrey said airily.

“I don’t have a cell phone.”

“I had to read about the arson on Twitter. ‘Historic Catholic School in New Orleans Burns; Nun Dies’. You didn’t tell me! I was worried. I wanted to see you.”

It’s true that Audrey, my old best friend and on-and-off-again lover had written real letters on real paper asking if she could visit New Orleans last year, and then again six months ago. When she read about the arson and murders, she begged to visit. I didn’t respond. I couldn’t risk thinking about her, or seeing her. Had to keep it zipped up. And
yet, when Audrey called the convent at 6 a.m. that Sunday morning, and announced she had arrived on a plane from New York, my heart flipped as I raced to meet her.

“Where can I crash after the show?”

“Not the convent. Maybe at my buddy Bernard’s. He’s a piece of work but he’s sweet.”

“I want to see the inner sanctum of your convent.”

“There is a campus curfew, so after dark there is no hanging outside.”

“Curfew?”

“I’ll explain everything on the way.”

Audrey and I left the arrivals terminal, she in her pink and gold, me in all black – scarf, gloves, and crucifix. We picked our way to the taxi line through hordes of travellers rolling their suitcases, families hugging and crying, and zombie teens text-walking. The morning was brutal. Sweltering heat, sloppy wet air. Our foreheads were stippled with sweat. Her mascara smeared.

“The heat is vicious.” Audrey huffed as she removed her hat. “Like inside the sun.”

Her metallic body suit radiated heat.

“Sticky day,” I said.

We fidgeted and wiped sweat as we waited for a taxi. The man in front of us in the taxi line tried to read the *Times-Picayune*, but it was so humid, the paper kept collapsing like a wet noodle.

I had called from the convent and asked Bernard for a ride to the airport. I was surprised that he was awake, even more surprised when he agreed. I didn’t think about
the return route.

“I don’t have cab money.”

“See?” She smiled. “Nothing’s changed. I got it.”

I smiled back and the tension between us eased. We fell into the shorthand of old lovers who could pick up the thread, even after a three-year hiatus.

“I want to do local things and see the French Quarter and have crawfish étouffée and a Sazerac and turtle soup.”

“Poor turtles.”

“Show me where you teach.”

“Not a good idea.”

“You ashamed of me?” She eyed me up and down again.

“No, drama queen. I’d need to score a visitor’s pass for you. Police are permanently stationed at the campus now and they’re not fond of visitors.”

“How are the other nuns?”

“Long story.”

For the duration of the taxi ride to Prytania Street, we talked about the fires. She’d read about the east wing fire but wanted to know more. I told Audrey about seeing Jack and Sister Therese’s bodies, the sick finality of their dead flesh, my suspicions about Prince, my first and hopefully only car chase, Attorney Sophia Kumar, Investigator Riveaux, the homicide team, and the black blouse with a burnt right sleeve.

We exited the taxi on Magazine Street, then walked for an hour, ducking under bamboo, mossy oaks, and dark palm trees. Cicadas droned in their whirring currents. Woodpeckers rattled the branches of a dry magnolia tree.
“Feels like we’re inside a volcano,” Audrey said.

“Hungry?”

“Starving.”

The Sisters ate all of our meals in the convent, but I did know of a nearby café serving local favourites. We walked across General Pershing Street to Pierre’s for Creole fusion.

“Sister Holiday. What a blessed day it is. Get over here right now.” Sonia moved from behind the spotless counter of her restaurant and gave me a sweaty hug. In her hair I could smell tarragon. “These fires, though. School curfew. We’re terrified.”

“Necessary precaution.”

“We will be praying with y’all this Sunday,’ said Sonia, “that is for sure.”

“It’s better to weather this together.”

“Each other is all we got.”

“Amen,” I said.

Audrey stared at me.

Sonia said, “Okay now, I owe you a snack. What will you and your congregation have for breakfast today?”

“We don’t have any money, so we can have leftovers and scraps.”

“We can?” Audrey asked quizzically as she inspected her manicure.

“Don’t insult me,” Sonia said. “This is my treat.”

“You sure?”

Sonia hugged me again. Sometimes the goodness of humans overwhelmed me.

“Can we have fried chicken for breakfast?” I asked.
“I insist.”

“We can share red beans and rice. And two chicory coffees, please. Thanks, Sonia. You’re very kind.”

“No catfish? No peach cobbler?” Sonia wiped her hands on her gold apron. The two times I have eaten in Sonia’s café, both times ‘on the house,’ I have seen more than one customer shed tears of joy over her culinary comfort foods, new twists on local favourites. In New Orleans, the food is fine. As in the finest. French delicacies and stick-to-your-ribs comforts. But it’s spiced so hot, the gumbo nearly eats through the bowl. One bite and you’re crying. Screaming like a charcoal brick at full burn. No thermometer goes high enough. Sonia was a regular at Saint Sebastian’s Sunday Mass. Two of her grandchildren attended our high school.

“Yes. Catfish.” Audrey smiled. Sonia smiled back and then padded away. “This place is amazing. Like we opened a door into an alternate reality.”

“People here are human beings who have human conversations and human moments.”

“Don’t trash NY. I still live there. You left, but that doesn’t mean it’s devolved into a dystopian shitshow, like *Wild Kylie of the Lightning Strike*?”

“What in the world is *Wild Kylie of the Lightning Strike*?”

“OMG. The post-apocalyptic road warrior movie. It was beyond. Dope. I mean edgy and crazy and woke as fuck.”

“I don’t watch movies anymore.”

“What do you do?”

“Pray.”
“What else?”

“Teach.”

Audrey was flummoxed. “You have to do more than pray and teach.”

“Look for arsonists.”

Fifteen minutes later the dishes started arriving.

“This food is legit insane. What does she put in the red beans and rice, MDMA? So good.” She picked up a crawfish. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Eat it.”

“But there are no claws.”

“In New England, you eat the claws, but in New Orleans, you eat the head,” Sonia chanted from behind the marble counter, “where the meat is the sweetest. And you have to slice the cake until you find the baby inside.”

“Baby,” Audrey tilted her head, “in a cake?”

I smiled at Sonia then sipped my coffee. “King Cakes are a Mardi Gras tradition. The bakers hide a tiny plastic baby inside, and if you find it, you will have good luck. Some interesting traditions down here.”

“Like surviving the .25 extra dirty martini lunch at Commander’s Palace.”

“Martinis for a quarter? We can afford that. Can we go there next?” Audrey smiled.

_I wish_, I thought.

After our feast, which Audrey scarfed down with gusto, we thanked Sonia and sweated our way back to Prytania Street.

Every panel of the sidewalk on the way back to Saint Sebastian’s was broken.
Shattered bricks or whole bricks missing. Blue forget-me-nots and white jasmine dripped sweet cologne along the fence. For as hard as Riveaux tried, could she ever make perfume as magical as what God already offers in nature?

I caught a flash of strawberry-blonde. Rosemary Flynn.

“Hello, Sister Holiday,” she said flatly. She was carrying two science textbooks and a stack of student papers. Even in the searing heat of high noon, Rosemary’s hair was perfectly styled, her fringe alarmingly level. Her lipstick was smooth. “And who is this?”

“I’m Audrey, from Holiday’s lost youth.” She extended her hand to Rosemary, who simply nodded in lieu of a handshake because of the heavy bundle in her arms.

“Rosemary Flynn. Pleasure.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” Audrey said with a wink.

“What are you doing here, Ms Flynn? It’s Sunday.” I kicked a rock into the street.

“Grading. It’s too hot in my house to think. And the weekends are the only times I can catch up, when students are not bothering me about something.”

“Amen,” I said.

Rosemary’s expression unnerved me.

“What are you two up to? Causing trouble?”

“Introducing an old friend to a new life,” I said.

“Don’t let me stop you.”

As Rosemary walked away, she looked over her right shoulder to offer us a thin smile.

“Stop.”

“Uptight bitches like that are wild in bed.”

“Um, please.” I tightened my scarf until it almost choked me.

“What? You’re on your vows but you’re not dead.”

“Rosemary Flynn is a control freak with a superiority complex.”

“Well, we can’t all be hot and nice.” Audrey pointed to herself. “It’s usually one or the other.”

“Rosemary and I have to share a classroom.”

“Torture for you, I’m sure.” She waved at Rosemary, who, once again, turned over her right shoulder, acknowledging the two of us as she placed her books in her car in the staff parking lot, then slid in and drove away. “Great legs. Hit it and quit it with Pleasure,” she said. “No strings attached.”

“Isn’t that what you told me many moons ago? ‘No strings attached’.”

“Look at us now. I need a cig.”

“Isn’t it too hot to smoke, even for you?” I asked.

“I have never smoked a cigarette inside a space shuttle engine, so this will be a first, but you know my cravings.” Audrey lit a cigarette and then we heard a voice shouting.

“No smoking. This is a smoke-free zone. Achoo!” It was Sister Honour rounding the corner with a grimace, her short legs moving so fast it was as if she was on tracks.

She was quicker than I thought. Was it Sister Honour who had cast the shadow that Jamie saw, convinced it was me? Our body shapes couldn’t have been more different, though.

No one was as short as me, except Sister Therese. It had never occurred to me before then
she might be involved.

“Hello, Sister Honour.”

“Healthy lungs at play. Tobacco usage is prohibited on school property.” She pointed to a No Smoking sign on the side of the school. “Sister Holiday, what on earth is going on?”

“Sorry, Sister. I thought… Well, my friend here is weak and addicted.”

Audrey exhaled a cloud of smoke.

“She’s not the only weak and sick and addicted one, is she?”

“We’re going to walk away now. You see this? This is the sight of us walking away.”

The sidewalk shrine for Sister Therese and Jack had lost all of its flowers but gained five new candle votives. There were at least twenty candles by then. Some tall, some short. Each candle overflowed with cloudy water from the brief but spirited early morning rain.

“Another superfan? Audrey asked about Sister Honour.

“She hates me. She hates that I’m gay.”

“You’re not gay.”

I shrugged. “Of course I’m still gay.”

“Not anymore.”

“It doesn’t work like that. I’m still attracted to women, just taking a sabbatical from sex and—”

She interrupted tensely. “Did they make you sign an ex-gay contract to join the Order?”
“Every Sister has a past. Believe me. Sister Augustine believes that everyone deserves a second chance. She’s trying to make Catholicism Cool Again.”

She laughed. “But aren’t you, like, married to Jesus?”

“I’m married to my work.”

“Who the hell cares anymore? Nuns and priests should be able to hook up with whomever they want. Gay marriage is legal now for Ch——”

“Don’t say ‘Christ’.”

“Touchy.” Audrey flicked her cigarette butt past me into the street, like Prince had done a week earlier. A sudden ache squeezed my lungs.

“I’ve taken vows.”

“Temporary vows.”

“They are real. My novitiate will be done soon, if I don’t mess it up. Permanent vows are next.”

“Not that you asked anything about me, but I’m engaged.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t get too excited.”

“Congrats. That’s... Wow.”

“Emily. She’s my therapist. Well, not anymore. I met her in therapy. Can you believe it?”

“That you went to therapy or that you are marrying your therapist?”

“Both.”

“Congratulations.” I gave her a hug. She smelled like I remembered. Tea and tobacco leaves. Powerful musk.
“I wish things were different.” Audrey held my gloved hands in hers. “Wish that it turned out differently for us. Wish we could go back ten years.”

“We can’t go back. Can’t go forward either. We’re stuck.”

I looked over my shoulders. I didn’t see anyone, but I knew we weren’t alone. God is present. Always.

“I miss you,” she said.

“This is hard,” I said. “Don’t make it harder than it already is.”

“That’s what she said.” She smiled.

“I’m serious. I’m different now.”

“Sister Holiday Walsh, a lesbian punk nun. Oh Lord.”

“Shhh.” I put my finger over Audrey’s soft lips to quieten her. We looked at each other for a moment longer than we should have.

I stole a visitor’s pass from Shelly’s desk and brought it to Audrey who was sweating and singing to herself on the school steps. During a brief tour of the west wing, during which we I endured shifty eyes of Officer Smitty, something bizarre happened. I was seized by the air. The ambient smell of ambient char and ash made me choke.

“Damn!” Audrey pat me on the back. “You okay?”

I coughed so hard my eyes watered. “Water!” I choked as we stumbled into John Vander Kitt’s classroom.

She grabbed one of his ubiquitous coffee thermoses from his desk. “Here!”

I took gulps of cold chicory coffee. My lungs settled instantly. I took a deep
breath.

It hit me quickly, the punch of the buzz. “Shit! Taste this.” I handed her the thermos.

Audrey took a sip. “What? It’s old coffee.”

“No.” I drank from the thermos again. “It’s half vodka. John’s a fucking drunk! Drunk all day.”

“Ugh.” Audrey gagged. “You’re right.”

John was a drunk. Was everyone harbouring a secret? Did everyone need a way to escape daily torments?

I took Audrey inside the convent so I could brush my teeth, get that wretched taste out of my mouth. Outside of my bedroom I noticed that my door was ajar.

“Wait in the hall,” I told Audrey. I looked into my room then ducked back into the hallway.

“Why?”

“There’s someone in my room.”

“ Weird. You sure?”

“Yes. Door’s open. I think someone’s in there.”

“We would have seen them.”

“I can feel it.”

“Still paranoid, I see.”

“For real. Stay here.”

“Holiday,” Audrey hollered from the hallway and I ran out.

“What? You okay?”

Sister Honour had backed Audrey against the opposite wall, the same way she had backed me up against the wall in the teachers’ lounge. With all of her lung power she said, “There are no visitors and no tours on weekends!”

“Help,” Audrey said as she stood behind me in the middle of the hallway.

“Sorry, Sister Honour, I—”

“Get her out, now!”

“Give me a minute. I need to fetch something. Audrey can wait here. Okay?”

“Get on with it.”

Back in my room I scanned the walls and surfaces. The window was closed though I knew I had left it cracked open for fresh air. I looked under the bed again but saw nothing. I looked in my closet. My black blouses and trousers had all been moved – pressed – to one side. My four neckerchiefs were unfolded.

Sister Honour escorted us out of the convent quickly, like she was the security detail at a downtown club.

“Someone is fucking with me,” I whispered to Audrey. “Trying to rattle me. If we’d got back one minute earlier, we would have seen them.”

“You sure?”

From the doorway to the convent, Sister Honour looked at us, venom in her eyes.

“That one has been watching me. I can feel it.”

“Only narcissists think everyone’s after them.”

I noticed Bernard Gregory who was also outside. He was sweeping in front of the
rectory. He crossed the street, popped into to the shed, and then waved to us. After he left, Father Reese, Sister Honour, and two students filed silently into the rectory.

Everyone looked serious. Bernard smiled as he walked over to us.

“Finishing up here and going to get the wheels,” he said.

A moment later he parked in front of the convent in his dented black pickup truck. His left mirror was shattered. The bumper was duct-taped on. He agreed to let Audrey crash at his apartment in the Marigny after her show at Twisted Sister. The irony of the music venue’s name was not lost on me.

I had to say goodbye to Audrey even though – or especially because – I would have given anything to watch her on stage. Almost anything.

“Bye for now,” I said.

“Gonna be three more years until I see you again?”

“You’ll be married. Why would you care?”

Audrey slid her gold sunglasses to the top of her head. She put her hand on my face, looked into my eyes. “Blue eyes,” she whispered. “I like you without make-up. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you without make-up.”

“Except after that shower. That morning in your apartment.”

“Right. That shower.” She moved closer.

“Don’t.”

“I used to think you were born with eye make-up on.”

Audrey’s heat was smooth, not like the sharp edges of the east wing’s flame or oppressive New Orleans heat. I wanted Audrey to press her hips into me, push me against the wall, and kiss my white dove, my Eve of ink on my throat. Me, Audrey, and Eve. A
threesome. I wanted to smell her tobacco musk and feel how wet I could make her.

Instead, I looked down at a small cactus with a tiny persimmon rose on it. Bernard pretended to read a comic book in the cab of his truck, but I felt his eyes on us. Bernard was quality. A true-blue friend. But he was a straight man, and most straight men could never let go of the lesbian fantasy. Or they were threatened in a way they could not begin to identify. Lesbians: hot foreplay. The appetiser before the main course. The male gaze, always hovering and ruinous.

“I still think about you,” Audrey whispered, her ornately painted and manicured fingers resting lightly on my hands. “I miss you.” She slid off my gloves. I put them back on.

“You know I can’t.”

I hugged her and she sighed. I held Audrey tight, as if I could press her into me, keep her with me in my orbit a little bit longer. A police car rolled by, slowing down in front of the school. I let go of Audrey and stepped back.

She tossed her purse into the floor of Bernard’s black truck and hopped in.

Before they drove away, he rolled down his window. “Any updates on the blouse?”

“No. Riveaux logged it more than a week ago. Waiting on DNA. I need to ask her.”

“You do that.”

They sped off.

A speckled black cat with her baby, a tiny puff with a straight-up tail, walked cautiously along the dusty, broken sidewalk. The mama cat reminded me of poor
Voodoo. I made a sign of the cross. The black kitten meeped. Roy appeared, poured some of his milk into an empty bottle cap and placed it down for them. The mother cat let the baby drink first. The feral cats of New Orleans lived between wild and tame. They didn’t need people, but if an opportunity presented itself, why not?

I heard breathing and thought it was the Holy Spirit. I looked up and saw another tormented face. Investigator Riveaux. She smelled of gardenias and looked even thinner than usual.

“Want to pray?” I moved over to make room for her on the bench.

“Bad news.” She sat down stiffly.

“The burnt blouse evidence? Anything conclusive?”

“Not that. This afternoon, another Catholic school across town, Saint Ann’s school, was set ablaze.”

“No.”

“Nine cases of smoke inhalation. Very serious.”

My eyes shut. “Anyone die?”

“No fatalities.”

“No.” I stood up abruptly. “I can’t.”

“Hey, wait,” Riveaux said.

“I can’t.”

“Sister.”

“When did the fire start at Saint Ann’s?” I asked. “The exact time.”

“2:10 p.m.”

“Why was anyone there on a Sunday?”
“Play rehearsal.”

“Eyewitnesses?”

“Nobody saw anything.”

“911 call? PRINCE cigarette butt.”

“Yes and yes.”

“Riveaux, this is too clean. This arson spree has been planned way in advance.”

“Probably. Arson requires deep logistical knowledge.”

“This didn’t start last week or even last month or even last year. It’s been going on for a lot longer. It didn’t happen out of the blue. It’s been a slow burn.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I’m queer. We know how to play the long game.”

“Lay low, wait for the right time?”

“Yes. The right time to make a move. Or ask for something. Revenge is best served cold.”

“Fire is definitely not cold.”

“If it is not Prince, it has to be someone in disguise.”

“Maybe it didn’t start that way. But they’re so far gone now, there is no coming back. ‘He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it.’ Orwell said that.”

“I have dirt for you.”

“What?” Riveaux’s eyes brightened.

“John Vander Kitt’s a drunk. He’s drinking all day on the job. Maybe he knows more about the fire than he is letting on. He’s certainly knows how to hide things.”

“Very good, Sister. This I can definitely use.”
Sickened by myself, the fact I had sold out John, I sprinted to my room. I wanted to go find Audrey, but I had no way to contact her. No number to call. No idea how long she’d be in town.

I ran across Prytania Street, into the convent. I ran up to my room. I opened the windows wider and turned the fan on high, but nothing stripped away the fire that clung to me like a curse. I lay down on my bed, my shoes and black clothes still on. The east wing. The cafeteria. The bus. My blouse. Now another school. PRINCE cigarettes. Why couldn’t I crack it?

I unbuttoned my blouse, rested my hands on my chest. My Sacred Heart tattoo hummed. One drop of tattooed blood dripped from the red heart like a slow tear. My ribcage raked up dramatically. I hadn’t been eating regularly. Nothing tasted good, except Sonia’s food. It was like my taste buds had been burnt off. The ghostly sensation of Audrey’s hand on my face, her lips near mine, sent chills cascading through my body. I slid my hands down my stomach, then further and felt the pulse of my aorta below my navel. My flaming ink heart, my broken heart, my secret heart – my asynchronous chorus.

My desire flooded back. I wanted to touch Audrey so badly. It was poison. Laying in my stiff convent bed, alone, desire swallowed me. It had been so long since I was upended like that. Even the fires, seeing two dead bodies hadn’t unbalanced me.

I started crying and couldn’t stop. No wonder Jesus’s brutalised, elegant body was my map. His passion, his grace during the brutality of suffering. I would never be that strong. I wanted to hide. To drown under the mask. Tattoo myself to death. Bury myself alive in own skin.
Chapter 28

“The city is on alert,” Sister Augustine told us in convent kitchen as we prepared for dinner. “Catholics are the target. We are used to being targeted, but now must show strength and consistency in the face of this terror.”

“We need to lay low, carry on. Business as usual,” I said. “We wait for the bastard to strike again then catch him in the act.”

Sister Honour gesticulated wildly. “No, no! We need more police, a longer curfew, and more CCTV cameras!”

“The students suspect each other. Parents are already calling about tomorrow’s classes,” said Sister Lourdes.

Sister Honour planted both palms on the table. “We must close the school and—”

“We must stay open!” Sister Lourdes screamed over her.

“We can’t close the school!” I pounded the table.

“Stop! Stop this. Sisters, please. The arsonist wants us to attack each other,” Sister Augustine replied. “We need solidarity – to stand together and share the Gospel. Our Lord is all the protection we need.”

“We should tend to our students,” Sister Honour said in a moment of rare calm.

“They are scared.”

For once I agreed with her.

Sister Augustine shook her head, white hair peeking out from behind her black veil. “We have to work together with the community to show that we are not afraid.”
“We are afraid. Someone is terrorising us.” I pulled my black gloves on tighter. The heat and sweat had made them shrink a bit.

She put her hands on my shoulders. “It’s time to be the leader I know you are,” Sister Augustine said. “You are tough and brilliant. I know it, but you don’t believe it yet.”

Sister Honour rolled her eyes.

“Thank you.”

“You have been chosen to do the hard work because you are capable. We can handle anything, together, with God.”

“Keep reminding me.”

“I will.”

“Amen,” I said. God is good.

Riveaux surprised us with a phone call to the convent. She joined us in the lounge an hour later. “We are recommending every Catholic school should close until we collar the firebug,” she said. “We need more patrols.”

Sister Honour said, “We need checkpoints and a city-wide curfew!”

“The firebug has started to step it up,” Riveaux added.

“Why can’t you say it? Prince Dempsey is stepping it up.”

“Sister Holiday, wake up,” said Sister Honour.

“I’m awake.”

“Prince Dempsey was at his doctor’s office during the cafeteria fire.”

“What?”
“His diabetes doctor, a nurse, and the office manager all testify to it.” A smile crept across her face.

“No. He was—”

“At the doc’s with his white pit bull.”

Sister Honour, cheeks sagging, said: “We all knew last week, before the conference downtown. Everyone knew, except the school’s sleuth. What a fool.” A smirk turned the corners of her mouth upward.

“Riveaux, why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“I have a thousand other pressing matters.”

“If Prince’s alibis are solid, then he must have an accomplice.”

“Arsonists don’t work like that, Sister,” said Riveaux.

I felt faint. “If it wasn’t Prince, then who in the hell is it?” The room spun again. I began to cough. “Who, Goddammit?”

Riveaux cleared her throat and said, “A pro. That much I’m sure. These scenes are clean. Neat. Orderly as a chemistry set.”

“I can’t. I can’t breathe.” I shut my eyes. “I want this to stop.” My left eye pulsed.

Dinner was agony that night. The gossip about me, the failed sleuth of Saint Sebastian’s who didn’t know Prince had an alibi for the second fire, filled the kitchen. For a religious lot, my Sisters were shady bitches. Not all that different from my Brooklyn bandmates.

During grace, I prayed for my boring life to return.
“Sisters, we must close the school until the arsonist is apprehended.” Sister Lourdes spoke softly as she refilled her mug with mint tea.

“Do I need to remind you that we have a New Orleans diocese meeting with the Bishop and principals from all local Catholic schools on Monday?” Sister Honour asked, crumbs falling from her lips. “You overworked the dough again, Sister Holiday.” She glared at me. “Let it rest. You poke at it too much.”

“We can’t all be as perfect as you, Sister Honour.” I dipped my toast point into the egg yolk, piercing the invisible membrane. Our dinner that night: poached eggs from the neighbour’s chicken coop, collard greens from our garden, fresh bread, and cold milk.

“None of us is perfect except our Lord Saviour,” replied Sister Honour as she chewed her dry bread. She never indulged in butter.

Sister Augustine, looking through the window, said calmly, “God made us in His image, so we are all perfect.”

“Amen,” I said.

“Amen,” said Sister Lourdes.

“Amen,” said Sister Augustine with a smile. “Sister Holiday, thank you for this meal. We are grateful.”

“Indeed!” Sister Lourdes said enthusiastically.

“Sister Holiday is bringing new light and new life into this school and convent, and I’m eager to see how you will contribute in even more ways after your permanent vows,” said Sister Augustine.

I couldn’t breathe. Permanent vows. I could hear Audrey laughing at me. Nothing is permanent except death.
After clearing the dishes, before Sunday night prayer, I sat outside, despite the curfew. I made myself small under the satsuma tree in the convent garden where Sister Therese had spent so much time digging, pruning, cultivating, composting, and singing. I pined for Sister Therese’s smile and her sweet, easy way. I knew so little about Sister T – I never asked her favourite colour or favourite scripture or earliest memory – but I’d never forget how she made me feel. Always welcome. Always seen. Two new garden cats were my companions until Big Red scared them off with his yowling. Usually a rooster would fear a cat, but not in New Orleans. I missed Voodoo. Silky little diva. I think Big Red missed her, too. I prayed at her grave. *Hail Mary.*

I heard tapping on the window overlooking the garden. Sister Augustine waved me inside.

In the kitchen, she said, “Curfew must be obeyed, Sister Holiday.”

“It’s suffocating.”

“The police only want to protect us.”

“Grogan is a sadist.”

“Detective Grogan is a nice man who is just doing his job. Please honour his wishes, okay. I’m not going to ask you again.”

“Fine.”

“You and I need to talk. I know you are trying, but I need you to help Prince Dempsey find the faithful path. We know he is innocent. We cannot disparage him.”

“Prince and I will never see eye to eye.”
“All the more reason for you to work together. You can do it. I know you can.”

“You’re the only one who has faith in me.”

She hugged me. “Not the only one, but I know you are going to be a great leader, Sister Holiday, because you understand struggle. You’re a fighter.”

I nodded. She turned and walked away to call the Bishop, who was contemplating closing down all the Catholic schools in New Orleans until the arsonist was apprehended.

The curfew and enhanced police presence had everyone on edge, but Sister Augustine kept us centred.
Monday morning arrived unceremoniously. I took a quick, cold shower. Trimmed my nails in the sink and watched the clippings disappear down the drain as I ran the water. I changed out of my white pyjamas and into my black uniform, wet hair dripping behind my ear, into my blouse collar and scarf.

The first Sister in the convent kitchen always made the coffee, so I placed the heavy kettle on the stove and ground coffee beans in the hand-cranked grinder while the water boiled. I buttered two slices of brown bread and wrapped them in a green cloth napkin to take to school. When the coffee was ready, I filled my thermos. I wiped crumbs off the counter and walked into the garden for a satsuma.

The morning was balmy and quiet. The sky over the Mississippi was moody, layered, three shades of blue. A mild breeze, heavy with jasmine, woke the palm trees. I crossed Prytania Street and nodded to Officer Hayden on the way inside the school.

The teacher’s lounge was empty apart from Bernard Gregory who was eating a Snickers for breakfast. I slid down into the seat next to him. His denim smelled of cut grass and gasoline.

“Why the matchbooks?” I whispered and nibbled my bread.

He swallowed his candy. “What?”

“When I was locked in the utility closet, I found your tin box of matchbooks.”

“I collect them from every bar I hear music.” I could see the small gap between his front teeth as he talked.

“Oh.”
“My reminder that I wanted to be somebody when I grow up. If I ever grow up.”

He balled up his candy wrapper and launched it into the trash.

I pressed my forehead into my gloved hands like I do after communion. “I thought I’d be on tour or a rising star by now. Look at me. Who am I?”

“You’re a star to me,” he said. At that moment I realised that he was wearing a black neckerchief similar to mine.

I rested my head in my hands again, and when I lifted my head, Bernard was gone.

John Vander Kitt walked into the lounge flanked by Officer Hayden and Riveaux, who I had not seen in our lounge before. It was both odd and familiar.

She said, “Morning, Sister.”

“Morning.”

“Mr Vander Kitt,” she said to him. “Can we talk?”

“Sure thing, Investigator Riveaux. Let me put this file in my office first, before I forget. They call it paperwork for a reason. Because it’s work.” He snorted at his own joke.

“John, is there anything you need to confess?” I asked, making sure Sister Augustine could hear me.

“Gosh. I…”

“Vander Kitt?” Officer Hayden said in a deep but soft voice. A bead of sweat rolled from his bald head down to his right jaw line. “We need to step outside. Can you accompany us?”

“At the moment I’m busy, I’m afraid.” He held up his folder.
“Let’s step outside.”

“Is Kathy okay?”

“This has nothing to do with Kathy.”

“What is going on?”

“What’s in your mug there? You drinking on the job?”

“Why, no!”

“It’s been confirmed by Sister Holiday here.” With his thumb he indicated me.

“This is all better explained outside.”

“Confirmed by Sister Holiday?” John blinked in surprise.

I looked down at the ground and tightened my soggy neckerchief. “I’m sorry.”

John laughed. “Sister Holiday would never say that.”

“We are not arresting you, sir,” Officer Hayden replied. “We need you to leave the premises though. You’re drunk.”

“Sister Holiday would never—” His legs gave out and he stumbled, his elbows hitting the edge of the table. “She’s my friend. She’s my sister!”

“John,” I said, “I know you’re an alcoholic. I drank from the thermos in your classroom.”

“I can explain! This isn’t happening,” he said and shook his head. “I’m taking care of my family.” John spoke furiously as Hayden briskly ushered him out. “I didn’t do anything wrong. I will get help! I can’t lose my job. Kathy’s healthcare!”

“I make myself sick,” I told Riveaux.

“You’re looking out for the students.”

“I’m looking out for myself. I betrayed John.”
I could have ignored John’s drinking. Instead I gave my friend up. Why? I’m selfish. Disgusting. I wanted to impress Riveaux and Sister Augustine, earn my keep.

I walked out and waited in Sister Augustine’s office, eager to tell her how I proved my loyalty to the school. My home. I waited ten minutes. Twelve. Fifteen minutes. I sat in Sister Augustine’s office in which countless students had stewed while they were scolded for some infraction, or when they sought spiritual guidance. I felt the weight of the principal’s position. Sister Augustine was our leader, our cheerleader, our judge and jury. What would she think of John’s drinking during school? I hated myself for turning on him. Sister Augustine never showed up. I looked outside, to the sidewalk. Her arms were lifted high in prayer at the shrine.
Chapter 30

Investigator Riveaux, Sister Augustine, and I sat in the second row of the stuffy New Orleans Parish courtroom as Prince’s trial began. Criminal trials usually took many long months to begin. But when the ADA proposed a speedy trial, Sophia Kumar happily assented because she was overly confident. She was cocky as hell, just like her client.

“All rise,” the bailiff said in a robotic, loud voice. “The Court of the First Judicial Circuit, Criminal Division, is now in session, the Honourable Susan M. Hicks presiding.”

Sister Augustine cleared her throat as preliminary proceedings started. Judge Hicks, wearing a long black robe, was flanked by two flags: a faded American flag and a gold, purple, and white fleurs-de-lis, the flag of New Orleans.

The judge cleared her throat. “Everyone but the jury may be seated. Mr Birch, please swear in the jury.”

The bailiff, looking as bored as one of my freshman students, glanced at the jury. Sophia Kumar was also confident that a jury trial rather than a bench trial would ultimately benefit Prince, so they pushed for it.

“Please raise your right hand.” Twelve jurors in their partitioned wooden jury box raised their right hands. “Do you solemnly swear or affirm that you will listen to this case and render a true verdict and a fair sentence as to this defendant?

“I do,” replied the chorus of jurors, followed by one straggler “I do,” uttered in a mousy voice.

“You may be seated.”
“Mr Birch, what is today’s case?”

“Your Honour, today’s case is The People versus Prince Dempsey on three counts: felony vandalism of the Vieux Carré Cathedral, one count of carrying a firearm without a permit, and one count of possession of stolen property.”

I lurched, almost fell out of my chair.

“Woah. You okay?” asked Riveaux.

“They dropped the resisting arrest charge? We chased him across the friggin’ city.”

“Pick your battles. Lucky we still got the firearm charge. He could have said it was his ‘comfort instrument.’”

“Is the prosecution ready?” Judge Hicks asked.

ADA Armando stood, smoothed his thin chestnut comb-over. “Yes, Your Honour.”

“Is the defence ready?”

Attorney Kumar rose confidently. “We are ready, Your Honour.”

Two jurors fanned themselves with paper.

Attorney Kumar moved her chair back from the table. Next to her, sitting calmly, was Prince Dempsey, with clean hair and a fresh shave. He looked so strange dressed properly, without BonTon by his side.

“May it please the court,” Attorney Kumar began, “and you, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, our defence is that the witnesses for the people who have attempted to identify Prince Dempsey are mistaken. This young man, Prince Dempsey – who suffered
in foster care and as a child during Katrina, a cruel Act of God, was working an onerous job as a bar-back on the night the vandalism occurred.”

Kumar continued. “Like the best mysteries, we are here today due to mistaken identity and a spiteful case of sabotage.”

She walked behind Prince, placed her manicured hands on his shoulders. “Please look at Prince Dempsey. Look into his face. Prince Dempsey is a hardworking young man from the Metarie neighbourhood. Prince is himself infirm and he lives with his infirm mother, Joelle Harriet Dempsey, in their FEMA trailer while he works two jobs to save money for the security deposit on a new apartment. In fact, she is too ill to attend today’s hearing. Prince Dempsey, with the help of Sister Holiday and Sister Augustine from his school, Saint Sebastian’s, wants to become the first member of his family to attend college. All that is threatened now” – she raised both arms high into the air – “because Prince finds himself accused of felony vandalism and a firearms count of which he is innocent. He is innocent of all of these charges. To each of you bravely serving on the jury today, you know that mere accusations are not evidence, and the judge will instruct you that the state must prove Prince Dempsey’s guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.”

That day, in the blistering courtroom, Attorney Kumar, like me, wore all black. Unlike clothing bought for a deep discount at the Catholic Guild on Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard, Kumar’s clothes fit well.

Attorney Kumar was so close to the jury foreman she practically sat on his lap.

“Ladies and gentleman, this is a cut-and-dry case of sabotage. Prince Dempsey is the easiest mark for a police department that’s regrettably overworked and under-
resourced. I urge you to keep an open mind, open eyes, and an open heart throughout this trial. People will look at him and think the worst, but Prince Dempsey is innocent. An accusation is merely that – an accusation. What if Prince were your son, your grandson, your godson? The ADA will sell you a lie that video footage shows my client at the scene of the crime. But I want you to think about how many times a day technology fails you. Twice a day? Ten times a day? I want you to think about how many times your computer has stalled or a text didn’t send or your phone wasn’t working for seemingly no reason at all. Think about an image file that’s been manipulated … what do the kids call it these days – Photoshoppery?” An elderly member of the jury laughed. Another juror smiled knowingly. “I want you to think about a time-stamp on a video that was incorrectly recorded because the master clock was off by one second, and one second turned into four seconds. With technology there are no safeguards, no hundred per cent guarantees. I want you to think about a time when your GPS or satellite navigation sent you right when you should have gone left, or sent you driving down the wrong road, or was working with an older satellite map.” She pointed at a juror with enormous owl eyes, and the juror nodded approvingly. “Has it happened to you? And yet, the assistant district attorney of our great city will have you – would have all of us – believe that an eight-second clip of CCTV footage of the Vieux Carré Cathedral shows with one hundred per cent certainty that our Prince Dempsey, our survivor of the storm, animal rescuer, perpetrated an act of felony vandalism.”

Attorney Kumar closed her eyes, shook her head as if exorcising a spirit from the courtroom. “Is Prince Dempsey perfect?” she hollered. “No. Is any of us perfect? Of course not.” Two jurors nodded. “We are human. We are flawed. Does that mean Prince
Dempsey – who suffers every minute of every day under the blight of poverty and deafness in one ear and the unspeakable rages of PTSD – should suffer in prison for six months?” She moved to the defence table where Prince hung his head. Good little actor, I thought.

“I want you to think about your son, your brother, your nephew.” She nodded to the jury members again. “Keep the open mind that I know you have when the ADA tries to paint a grisly picture, like a Hollywood villain, of my client. They will lie to you. They will try to sell you on the idea that he is a cunning mastermind, po’ white trash, a freak, a loser, a gangbanger, a common criminal. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury – sisters and brothers of the jury – Prince Dempsey is the underdog here. This is a classic set up. We will prove his innocence for complete exoneration. Like his beloved dog, BonTon, the abused dog, Prince Dempsey is a rescue. Prince Dempsey is the victim. Prince Dempsey is all of us. I am Prince Dempsey. You are Prince Dempsey. We are all Prince Dempsey.”

“Give me a fucking break.” I was nauseous. “Makes him sound like a saint.”

“Shhh.” Riveaux elbowed me.

In the hall during a ten-minute trial recess, Riveaux seemed anxious.

“What’s up?

“I can’t remember what I can’t remember.” Riveaux wiped her brow, sipped iced tea from her travel mug “It pushes and pulls, the forgetting.”

“You’re high again. Vicodin?”

“Vicodin. Tramadol. Yesterday it was Oxy. Demerol, too. I got fired.”
“What?”

“Canned. Captain fired me this morning. He and Grogan, they’ve been gunning for me for a while. They hated having a lead female investigator in the fire department. Sexist fuckheads. That and I lost two reports, the blouse, and another exhibit from the Saint Sebastian’s case.”

“The black blouse? You lost the burned blouse that Bernard found?”

“At least I didn’t lose the PRINCE cigarette butt.”

“Unbelievable. No memory of what you did with the blouse?”

“I have a foggy memory of putting it in a mailbox.”

“Dear Lord. You need to flush that shit out of your system.”

“I have no idea what I think I am doing versus what I am actually doing.”

“What’s next?”

“Rehab in Atlanta, again, and again, until I get clean or it kills me.”

“After rehab?”

“Dunno.” She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her sweaty nose.

“You’ll come back to New Orleans, right?”

“Sure. The bayou’s my home, baby, although the heat is wearing me down.”

“Will you try to get back into the fire department or the police force?”

“I’m ready for the private investigator route. Time to be my own boss.”

“A private eye?”

“Yeah. I’m applying for my PI license this week. New Orleans has some bullshit new rules. You need a thousand hours of training for a license. I have to start shadowing a PI after rehab.”
“You can do it.”

“Then you can join my team. Magnolia Riveaux & Sister Holiday, Private Eyes.”

“Divine Private Eyes.”

“Sure.”

“Get us a truck with a working air-conditioner.”

“I got a long list of things that need fixin.’”

Court resumed its session ten minutes later.

The bailiff cleared his throat. “The defence calls our first witness: Sister Augustine Barrow.”

Sister Augustine, buoyed by a sense of duty, rose and took her place near the bailiff. Her veil followed her, patient as a feather. The bailiff moved the leather-bound Bible in front of her lissom body. The roomed hummed with anticipation.

“Please raise your right hand.”

As Sister Augustine placed her left hand on the Bible and raised her right arm, her black blouse slid down. For the first time, with me in the audience and her in the spotlight, I saw her as a person, not my Mother Superior. I studied her face. Her gestures. Her in-between spaces.

The court officer asked Sister Augustine: “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, so help you God?”

I scrutinised her face, her calm eyes, the skin on the inside of her right wrist and forearm. A colour change caught my eye. Just on her wrist. The place where veins intersect. It looked like a tattoo for a split-second.

No. It was a dark burgundy cross.
I craned my neck, practically toppling over as I looked closer.

“I do,” Sister Augustine replied.

It was a burn that matched the burnt sleeve Bernard had found in my trash. From where I sat, with the play of shadows from the courtroom’s fluorescent lights, Sister Augustine’s burn mark had the shape of a cross, the shape that saved me.

Instantly I remembered: *You smell like new trees and calendula*. Sister Therese had said that to Sister Augustine the morning after the first fire.

I looked at Riveaux, spaced out, wriggling theatrically in her chair, floating her hands up and down.

“Riveuax,” I whispered. “What’s calendula used for?”


Burn cream.
Chapter 31

Sergeant Ruby Decker and Detective Reggie Grogan chatted quietly during Sister Augustine’s testimony. She was on the stand for ten minutes, if that. She answered each question about Prince – his damaged childhood, his place at Saint Sebastian’s, God’s love for him – succinctly but kindly.

At the defence table, Prince Dempsey’s head bobbed. Attorney Kumar said something in his ear and he woke up.

Grogan’s eyes met mine. His recent haircut made him look like an army captain.

Before expert witness questioning began for Riveaux, Sister Augustine walked into the hall. I dashed out of my seat but didn’t see her. I ran up and down the length of the hallway but she was gone. Finally outside I saw Sister Augustine was walking away from the courthouse. Her black veil in slow motion.

“Sister.”

She turned around.

“I know.” I was out of breath.

“You know what?”

“I know everything. You have to leave. You need to disappear.”

“What?”

“Sister Therese. And Jack. And Jamie’s leg. Lamont’s in a pray-the-gay away camp. And the bus.”

She sighed. “When choices are limited, the unthinkable is the only way to carve a new path.”
I put my hands on my knees, tried to catch my breath. “I cannot believe the words coming out of your mouth right now.”

“What words?” she asked. “I do what I have to do to save the Church. To save you. Like Judith. God has asked this of me.”

Her earnest eyes.

“Where is your remorse?”

“Jack is being reborn from the ashes. Sister Therese is being reborn.” She smiled. “They are now infinite. The impossible is our only true test. You know that better than anyone, Sister Holiday.” She held my gloved hands.

“We’ve been terrified.”

“You of all people understand tests. God asked Judith to take a life. To feel life extinguish in her bare hands. God asked Abraham to sacrifice his own flesh and blood, his son, Isaac. Can you even imagine that courage?”

“You pushed Sister Therese down the steps. She smelled the calendula of your burn cream.”

“She was ready to expose me,” Sister Augustine said in a voice so flat it didn’t sound like her. “Jack and Sister Therese are now with our Lord, Sister Holiday.”

“You put my guitar pick on Sister Therese’s body. You put a dead cat on my doorstep.”

“I found the poor animal in the garden, begging to be put out of her misery.”

“You opened my mail.”

“You don’t get very much mail. Your father and brother have never written. Not once in three years. They want nothing to do you with. I’m surprised your father never
pressed charges after you left your mother alone to die. She must have been so scared, burning in that van. What do you think it felt like, getting cooked alive?”

“Stop.”

“But I wouldn’t throw you out of the convent. If only you were not homosexual, dear, you’d have your choice of Orders.”

“All will be absolved. You set me up, from the beginning.” It was me. I was the easy mark. “You asked Peggy about arson. You tricked her.”

“I knew you would not question me. I accepted you – deviant, sick pervert – when no one else in the country would. I gave you time to reflect.”

“You locked me in the closet. You tampered with Prince’s insulin, kept him on edge.”

She smiled. “We came close to losing him that day, before the convention. Jack and Sister Therese made the ultimate sacrifice. We are needed again. Our Church is relevant again. We cannot afford to get lost in the churn of time.”

“I’m telling Grogan and Decker.”

“No, you’re not. You’re going to drive me to the bus station and help me leave.”

“What?”

“I’m leaving New Orleans tonight.”

“But this is your home.”

“I will go where God needs me.”

But Sister Augustine did leave. And I helped her.

That night, in the hot red truck, I could have told Riveaux everything. That I was wrong. It wasn’t Prince, although he had vandalised the cathedral. Instead it was Sister
Augustine who had set the fires. It was Sister Augustine who had killed Jack and Sister
Therese to maintain control and make me pay. To save the church, the school, and her
role in life. She stole the $100 from the till last year and used it to feed students
contraband – the occasional bottle of booze, packs of imported cigarettes – to ensnare me.

She was giving Prince too much insulin or too little. Sister Augustine exploited the
women of the Prison Birth Centre, pumped them in “confession” for their arson secrets
and methods. She walked in and out of the cafeteria, on and off the bus before the fires,
without being noticed or remembered. People see what they want to see. In the veil, we
are invisible. Once Riveaux knew the truth, we’d have to tell Decker and Grogan. I
couldn’t talk until I was sure Sister Augustine was gone. Otherwise she’d be in jail for
the rest of her life. Yes, Sister Augustine played me. She used me. She saw an
opportunity, three years ago, and seized it. Welcomed me with open arms. But I deserved
it. All of it. It was my penance. Sister Augustine had committed the ultimate sin, but so
had I. I already killed one mother. I wasn’t going to lose another one.
Bernard Gregory lent me his truck. I lied and said I needed to help a student with an emergency. Even though I didn’t have a license and he had never seen me drive, he didn’t flinch. “Whatever you need, Sis.”

I drove Sister Augustine to the bus station, praying I wouldn’t be noticed. With the money Bernard gave me for my Judith tattoo days ago, and sixty dollars I had stolen from the convent utility fund, I bought Sister Augustine a bus ticket to Mexico. Her bus crawled out of the parking lot with no fanfare. It was hazy and eerily silent. No night birds or cicadas.

I drove Bernard’s truck back to the church parking lot. Shut the door, locked the car, and walked toward the convent.

The sidewalk shrine outside of the church had grown again. A half dozen more candles had been added. Their incandescent lights blinked like fireflies in thick night.

That’s when I heard it. Barking. I spun around twice but didn’t see Prince or his pit bulls. I didn’t see anyone. Parked on the street near the shrine a familiar site came into focus. Riveaux’s red pickup. I ran over to it. The keys were still in the ignition.

“Hello?” I walked to the school’s main entrance. Nothing roused. “Riveaux?”

I walked from the school’s walkway across the lawn to the church. The interior lights streamed through the stained-glass windows.

“Hello?”

Riveaux stood in the middle of the church, between the two sections of church pews. Sweating, on her phone, Riveaux raised her hand to signal stop.
“Riveaux. What’s up? You want a late-night prayer session or something?”

As I walked toward the altar, I shook my head. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. My hands shook.

“Sister Augustine?”

Sister Augustine knelt in front of Riveaux at the altar. Her hands were pressed together, thumb to thumb, in prayer position. Handcuffs locked her thin wrists together.

“Sister Augustine? Riveaux? What the hell is going on?”

Riveaux laughed. “You’re too much. You’re asking me ‘what the hell is going on??’”

Sister Augustine didn’t move from her position of prayer. Didn’t look over or break her concentration.

“Let me guess. I know what you’re going to say.” She sipped from her water bottle. “You’re going to tell me that it was Sister Augustine behind the fires.”

“Listen. I can explain.”

“You’re dying to tell me that it was Sister Augustine behind Jack and Sister Therese’s fall. You cracked the case. Well done.”

I was speechless.

“You helped her escape. The question is why?”

“You’ve been following me?”

“I overheard your tête-à-tête with Sister Augustine after her testimony. It’s more than that. I listened to everything you’ve said in the truck the past two weeks. The answer’s always in the evidence. It all pointed to Honour or Augustine. They knew the building’s security codes and class schedules. Yesterday I followed you out to the
hallway during Prince’s trial. I followed you to the street outside of the courthouse. I watched you drive Bernard’s truck to the bus and help our arsonist escape.”

“You lied!”

“You lied first.”

“You spied on me. You let me tag along this whole time so you could spy.”

“That’s my job. I’m an arson investigator. After your joyride to the bus station, I pulled her bus over. I can’t arrest her, but Decker and Grogan can. I called them. They’re on their way here right now.”

“No.”

“Sister Augustine was happy I brought her in. She requested a rosary before our hand-off to the Homicide squad.”

“Who else knows I bought her a ticket?” I was dizzy. I tried to kneel steadily but fell. Bare knees hitting the hard ground violently, not like the softness of genuflection.

“Woah. Easy. No one else knows you were an accomplice. Only me and you and Sister Augustine.”

“You going to have them arrest me too?”

The church spun.

“Yes. You helped Sister Augustine escape.”

“I’ll lie. I’ll say you are on drugs and I didn’t know her plan.”

“Pious of you.”

Sister Augustine stood. Her hands cuffed in front of her.

A loud bang rang in my ear. The church’s main door. Where so many parishioners enter and exit for redemption. Walking toward us were Prince and BonTon.
“Prince, get out.”

“Y’all having a party in here?” he said. “Sister Augustine? Yo. Why’s she in cuffs, dawg?”

BonTon gnashed her teeth and lunged at Riveaux.

“Easy,” said Riveaux. “Get that damn dog away from me.”

“Or what?” Prince said. “You’re not packin’. You ain’t the police.”

“Go outside,” I pleaded. “Sister Augustine, please make Prince listen.”

I turned to see Sister Augustine’s reaction, but she was gone.

“Riveaux.”

“What?”

“Sister Augustine’s gone.”

“Fuck.”

“Nice work, Prince.”

“Go out the front,” Riveaux said. “I’ll take the side door.”

I sprinted past Prince as the dog barked wildly. I ran through the main doors but saw nothing. Riveaux, barely jogging, more wooden than ever, was moving slowly. By the time she exited the side door I had already done two laps around the school.

“Where the hell is she?” I asked.

“She’s handcuffed. And she’s old. She won’t get far.”

“Sister Augustine,” I called into the air, “this is not the way you want things to end.”

Riveaux pointed. “The shed!”

Across the courtyard at the utility shed, the same one Bernard ran into to get the
water buckets during the cafeteria fire, the door was open. Something rattled inside.

I ran to the shed at full clip with Riveaux sweating and trailing behind.

“Sister Augustine.”

In the shed I smelled it. The painful, hot, sweet smell. Gasoline.

“Sister.”

I flipped the light on and saw Sister Augustine kneeling on the wet ground. She had soaked herself in gasoline. The red container that Bernard used to fill the old lawnmower was on its side, empty. Her veil, still on her head, dripped with gas.

“Sister. What are you doing?”

“It’s time. The time has come. My rebirth will begin tonight. In God’s name we pray.” Between her fingers was one of Bernard’s matchbooks.

Riveaux, panting behind me, said, “Hey, hey. What do we have here?”

“Back up,” I said. “Give her room.”

Sister Augustine walked past me, out of the shed. The vapours of the gas made me see triple. “Sister Augustine. Please.”

Outside of the shed, in the dim glow of the streetlight, Sister Augustine’s smile returned.

I knelt down in front of her. “You cannot kill yourself. Suicide is a sin.”

“So is murder. It is what the Lord asked.”

“If you kill yourself you’ll have no time to repent. It will be unforgivable.”

Riveaux and I talked calmly and softly as Sister Augustine rearranged her bony hands in the cuffs so that she could open the red matchbook. She ripped one paper match from the pack.
I lunged toward Sister Augustine and she yelled “No!”

“Put down the matches, Sister,” Riveaux said.

“You cannot kill yourself,” I pleaded. “It’s a mortal sin. Put down the matches, please. Remember ‘God created us not to own but to take care of creation.’ We’re only renting these bodies. Only God can choose.”

Sister Augustine fell to her knees.

“Put down the matches.” I held out my hand.

“You’re right, Sister Holiday. My life is not mine to take.”

“Give me the matches.”

She continued the Catechism. “‘We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of.’”

She tried to lift her cuffed hands to the sky, and I snatched the matchbook from her hands, threw it to Riveaux.

The barking and voices had disturbed Sister Honour and Sister Lourdes. The women approached the open door of the shed cautiously.

“I must repent,” Sister Augustine said. “Lord, my Saviour. All I do, I do for you. I sacrificed our brother Jack and our Sister Therese for your glory.”

Sister Honour snarled, “What?”

“Not now,” Riveaux snapped.

“What did you say?” asked Sister Honour.

“It’s all for you, Lord.”

“You said you sacrificed Jack and Sister Therese.” Sister Honour thundered at Sister Augustine, spit flying from her lips.
“Give us space,” I said.

Sister Honour grabbed Sister Augustine’s thin arms, lifted her, threw her like a demon against the exterior wall of the shed. I tried to pull her back and she pushed me away.

“Stop,” Riveaux said. “You’re not helping.”

“What did you do?” asked Sister Honour venomously.

“I’m sorry,” Sister Augustine said. “I’m sorry.”

Sister Augustine moved away from the shed. Sister Honour was relentless. I put my hand on her thick arm again. She pushed me away with ferocious strength. “What did you do? How could you? You betrayed us.”

Sister Augustine walked backwards on the sidewalk, crying. “All I do, all I have done every minute of every day, it is all for God. I would not let Him be erased.”

Sister Honour kept yawped in her face as Riveaux and I tried to pull her back. Sister Augustine’s tears gushed hard, like Jamie’s surge of blood the night of the first fire.

“No,” shouted Prince. “This is messed up. Leave her alone.” BonTon nipped at Riveaux’s leg and Riveaux jumped back.

Sister Honour cursed at Sister Augustine. Foaming at the mouth. Teeth cutting the air. Sister Augustine cried as she backed up, step by step, until it was too late. We were so focused on stopping Sister Honour’s verbal lashing that we didn’t notice what was happening. Sister Augustine had walked backwards into the sidewalk shrine. There were more than twenty candles but one wick was all it took. Her uniform, doused in gasoline, exploded in flames. Faster than an Amen.
“Sister,” I screamed. “No.”

“Save her!” Prince circled her flaming body. BonTon squealed.

Sister Augustine was howling, flapping her arms.

I tackled her to the ground but the flames were too intense. I burned my right arm badly and yelped. Then I felt my body lift. Bernard had picked me up, out of the flames.

I tried to leap up. “Bernard!”

But Riveaux held me down. “No.” She patted out flames on my arm.

Bernard was straddling Sister Augustine, who was on her stomach, wailing. He was pounding her torso and arms, trying to kill the fire. His coveralls ignited and he fell back hard. His denim must have been saturated with gasoline from work, his constant wrestling with the lawnmower. From his head to his boots fire travelled with devilish speed. He roared and fell like a speared beast.

Sister Honour raised her hands high. “No, Lord. I am so sorry!”

“Shut the fuck up.” Riveaux ripped Sister Honour’s veil off her head and tried in vain to swat the flames on Sister Augustine’s back and Bernard’s legs, but the veil caught fire. She dropped it.

“Save them,” I said to Riveaux who was moving in slow motion. Prince, sobbing, grabbed BonTon’s leash and ran toward the street.

“We need a bucket of water or the hose from the shed.”

I ran into the shed, walking on the gas-soaked floor, holding my upper arm. “Hail Mary. Mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness, our hope. To thee we do cry, banished children of Eve.” The hose was tangled so I threw the bucket into the big sink. Filled it. As I ran back to Bernard and Sister at the shrine. I threw the water onto Bernard. The fire
buckled in the middle as if it was laughing. It lapped up higher than before, brighter, with a meaner light.

It was too late. Bernard and Sister Augustine were charred black carcases on the ground. Riveaux pounded the pavement with her open palms, cursing.

“I’m sorry!” Sister Honour beat her head. “I’m sorry. Forgive me, Sister Holiday.”

I looked up and saw Grogan and Decker sprinting from across the street with Prince. Sister Augustine and Bernard’s bodies were smouldering but perfectly still. Lights from the approaching fire engines illuminated the street.

Kneeling on the searing ground, the burns on my chin and right arm felt radioactive. Fire ate away more of Bernard’s face. Just a few feet away from me and I was paralyzed again. I couldn’t save anyone from the fire.

The night turned ruthlessly quiet except for Prince’s and Sister Honour’s crying and the fire engines turning the corner. The flames had devoured their bodies. Sister Augustine looked a foot shorter, skin shrinking, leather melting on bone.

“Get back!” Grogan picked me up and carried me across the street.

“Bernard saved your ass,” Riveaux said breathlessly.

I felt his keys in my pocket. “He must have walked here to find me. I borrowed his truck.”

I spat at Riveaux. “I thought we were friends, and you lied to me.”

“After this is all done, and after Atlanta, I will make you understand.”

“Fuck you.”

“Don’t be like that.”
“I trusted you. I kept your secrets.”

“I trusted you.” She leaned in closer. “I’m not going to rat you out. I won’t say that you were helping Sister A skip town.”

“How can I believe anything you say?”

“Your secret will stay with me. Lie about that bus ticket you bought, and lie well. I’ll back you up.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“You do, actually.”

“You’re trying to save your job.”

“My fire career is over. I’m still going to rehab.”

“When?”

“After all the paperwork is done and the case is settled, I’m going to prison.”

“What?”

“Not real prison. A three-month opioid rehab in Atlanta – will feel like prison.”

I was in prison. The cage of fire. I’m ready to break out. Finally.

I sat on the scorched cement, tried to bury my face in my hands but my right hand and arm stung. “I can’t believe they’re all gone. Sister Augustine. Sister Therese. Bernard. They all saved me in different ways. Bernard and I were going to get matching tattoos.”

She pointed at my arms and neck. “You don’t have much real estate left.”

“I don’t have much of anything left.”

“Don’t feel sorry for yourself. Keep that arm clean and bandaged. Watch that scar tissue.”
“I don’t need advice from you.”

“Don’t make me worry about you, Sister.”

“Worry about yourself. I’m on the righteous path.”

“That right?” Her eyebrows lifted above her violet eyes, then she turned and walked away.

Rosemary Flynn appeared with a first-aid kit. Tears streaked her usually perfect mascara.

“The whole city here?”

I acted upset to see her, but when Rosemary was near me, lightning simmered in my hands, under my skin, like I was sweating inside my blood.

“Shut up and let me help you,” she said as she opened the medical kit. I heard an ambulance rounding the corner.

The itch inside my burn was excruciating. More scar tissue to taunt me for the rest of my days. How badly I wanted to kiss Rosemary. To bring my face to hers and hover there. The delicate shock of the first kiss. Like smothering a lit-match with your fingertips.

Promises. Vows. Time to choose – will I be a Sister for the rest of my life or step back from the edge? Start one story, end another? If endings are a series of unexpected beginnings, I’m okay with that.

Riveaux and I made a promise to keep each other’s secrets. Would we? I’m a sinner, but when I bring my burned hand to my face, when I touch a scar forming, I feel the heat of something divine.

Sister Honour’s eyes were red with tears. Her short grey hair was exposed. She
held Sister Lourdes’s right hand and my left hand. Drawing a line between this world and whatever’s after us, we tearfully recited words that would hopefully rise with the smoke, into the next realm.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground. For out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

I’m supposed to believe that God is a powerful white man with a white beard residing on a marshmallow-white cloud, but I don’t. God isn’t a person. God is everything, everywhere, in all of this, the details I can remember and everything I’ve forgotten. The stubbornness of fire. The clues so obvious they blind you. Blood that cleanses and blood that kills. God is perfection, even in devastation. This might be the only thing I’m sure of. God is especially alive in women. The arc of a shoulder, the grey depth of a stare, the hand that is strong enough to reach out and give, the hand that is strong enough to take.