

Priest

by

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PROLOGUE

“Minneapolis sucks,” Gwen yelled before slamming and locking the bathroom door. That left Charlie to unscrew his own scrambled thoughts about the day...

The way he saw it, Gwen was angry, not at the city, but at the crowd of obsequious money- changers who had pestered them all day. Despite pressures to make a quick decision on a new plant for Minnesotans, Charlie was sufficiently experienced to avoid outright commitment. But now he was upset ending up the butt of Gwen’s hostility. And dreading the business dinner tonight - because it would be just more of the same. Charlie had intentionally planned to have an hour or so to relax with Gwen; a kind of therapeutic togetherness with maybe some, you know... but no way, not with the locked bathroom door thingy.

“Hey, Hon,” he groaned, leaning against the heavy door. “You’ve been in there going on a half-hour, so we’re not going to have much time to rest before we have to get going... Hon? Come on, unlock the friggin’ door, woman...”

No response.

Gwen had also said that she wanted to go home, meaning to North Carolina, their beach home where they planned on meeting their friend, Father Sal. The hope was to meet him on Saturday, the 29th, for a long weekend, but at the last minute their plans were revised, meaning they wouldn’t even check out until Saturday morning. That meant Sunday morning arrival at Kure Beach. Gwen had called to alert Sal, but he was already en route. So, to avoid any problem, she arranged for a note to be left for him with the airline, to be delivered when he arrived at RDU.

Charlie, Gwen and Father Salvador had grown up together in San Antonio and remained fast friends despite religious and life style differences. Once a year they usually succeeded in getting together somewhere.

Still waiting, Charlie considered how Gwen had accompanied him for the full day in Minneapolis. He felt she should be capable of understanding just how drained he was after all the business politicking. He was skilled at hiding his emotions, but (dammit) she had failed to pick up on the feelings of rejection and neglect that had begun to nag him.

“Gwen?” He purred for the last time, with no result. No sounds came through the door. He heard only the rumble of Lake Street traffic over the muffled rustling of the huge hotel. So he settled on nurturing his growing peeve with a drink.

Shedding tie, tasseled loafers, and trousers, he headed for the bar in the living room for a splash of Sheraton’s gifted bubbly - and salted nuts.

Fully distressed with the inability to make ‘relaxation’ with Gwen, he was surprised to hear the quick, solid flush of the commode, quickly followed by the bathroom door banging open. And, out she came. But rather than falling into his arms as his lingering fantasy would demand, Gwen swept past him with a dramatic flourish, wearing a diaphanous, blue chemise that failed to slim her mature figure. Turning to face him, hands on hips, she shook her head like an older version of Shirley Temple, causing her bleached blonde curls to undulate.

“Boy, Chaz, you certainly have gotten to be an old grouch,” she said with a frown, “but if you’ll pour me one of those, I’ll love you forever – even without your pants.”

Gwen spoke over her shoulder as she vectored toward the sofa, “We’ve got thirty

minutes to relax before we have to start getting dressed, so just let me stretch out for a few minutes to watch the news and weather. All right?”

Oozing disappointment, Charlie replied dryly, “It’s obvious that the years have altered our definition of just what constitutes fun-filled relaxation. Maybe a drink can change your mind – or dull mine,” he added from behind his drink.

Leaving the offer hanging, he made up a drink and carried it to her. As he came close, Gwen studied her Chaz grimly - red garters, black stockings, initialed, iridescent, white, French-cuff shirt flowing grandly over his buttocks. By comparison, Charles A. Victor’s top was high class; frame-less glasses tucked into heavily lacquered white hair, gold strap Rolex (gift from Father Sal), and a sparkling two karat ring on his left pinky caressing a wide gold band that tied him to her. In turn they all flashed brightly on the walls as he passed through shafts of sun darting in through the windows. Gwen simply watched (lovingly), pretending to look a bit guilty, but in reality she thoroughly enjoyed his childish pain.

Using the remote, Gwen turned on the TV and quickly found CNN – her favorite. At that moment, the picture settled on Bob Sheets, Director of the National Hurricane Center, Coral Gables, Florida. Bob was describing the destruction resulting from hurricane Andrew as it sliced through Louisiana. He referred to a national map displaying the weather pattern for today through Sunday. (Just when they hoped to be in North Carolina.) The hurricane’s immediate path remained uncertain, but Gwen noted that their reunion with Father Sal at the beach house might well be rough and wet.

Charlie returned slowly from the bar a second time, his clear plastic cup refilled with booze, to find Gwen staring and pointing at the TV screen to get his attention... “It’s bad, Chaz.”

“Fourteen dead in Florida!” he noted in agreement. “Who knows how many more in Louisiana? Do you think we’re going to get the tail end of Andrew at the beach? Seems it’s getting to be a regular occurrence. Maybe we should consider selling the place and buying up in the mountains, Boone or Blowing Rock? What do you think?”

“Wrong, Chaz. You know how much I love that place. You do as well. Admit it, even if we don’t use it that much. Besides, I am really only worried that the storm could be upsetting and dangerous for Sal. He’s not used to our weather patterns. It’s bad enough we aren’t there with him.”

“And why is he staying with us?” Charlie mumbled. “He told me, but I’ve totally forgotten. Something to do with the church, I think.”

“He’s speaking at a Diocesan conference in Wilmington... on Friday and Saturday.”

Father Sal, Salvador Ramirez, Pastor at Immaculate Conception Church in Syracuse, New York, had been Charlie’s buddy since they were in Catholic school together in San Antonio. As preordained by the wishes of his mother, Sal stayed on in religious life. Charlie, caught up in what turned out to be a temporary state of personal desperation, had joined Sal at seminary for a brief – or as Charlie refers to it: a ‘semi-seminary’ experience. Actually, Charlie was enthused and inspired in Christ until the full consequence of permanent celibacy bloomed... after meeting Sal’s friend, Gwen!

Though Sal and Charlie followed separate and successful paths in their final choices of vocations, they had always been able to maintain their warm friendship through correspondence and frequent visits.

As the TV blared, Charlie caught himself carefully scratching through the stiff, coiffed hair on his head with a pinky finger, wondering why the mention of a conference rang a bell. Hoping to jog recall, he wandered to the bar to top off once more, then returned to sit next to Gwen on the gold brocade couch. Stretching his legs out to rest his feet on the glass coffee table, he submitted to a loud commercial as he pulled on a long thread coming from the band of his black sock.

Something about black socks caught his attention. It seemed important... black socks... black stockings? Suddenly he turned away from Gwen, gulped his drink and grimaced like he'd been poisoned.

"Gwen, do me a favor and reach into my jacket pocket there next to you and get my calendar book, please? Thanks. Open it to August and see what's noted for this week... No, don't show it to me. I really don't want to see it. Just tell me what's there." His sphincter muscles were beginning to constrict.

"Well, all you have here is 'Grace, Sr.' on the 27th, tomorrow." Then Gwen asked demurely (batting her eyelids), "Just what or who is Senior Grace? Someone from San Antonio?"

Charlie thought it best to depend on manipulation: "Darling, I know you're going to be angry with me," he groaned, standing to face her. "You remember, back in May, I think it was, when I mentioned Sal's trip and his visit with us at the beach? Remember how I asked you to handle the arrangements? Do you recall?" He was delighted when Gwen nodded confirmation.

Reseating himself close to her, he turned to face her and placed a hand on her knee. "Well, you know how much I trust you to follow through..." His voice softened to a patronizing tone. "I just put it out of my mind, just like that. So, when Helen contacted me asking if one of her Sisters could visit us, I didn't see much reason why not, you know. Helen went on and on about the great time she had in June when she was here... there, that is. Before I knew it I'd said yes. Well..."

Gwen jumped on the obvious: "Chaz, please don't tell me you inadvertently arranged a surprise rendezvous for a mysterious Sister Grace and our pal, Sal?"

So saying, Gwen's demeanor morphed before his eyes, going from serious to impish delight, moving him quickly through pained embarrassment to anger... until her infectious humor flooded Charlie's brain. Turning, he grabbed her in a bear hug and began to laugh, lightly at first, then with enthusiasm that Gwen graciously shared.

"Can you believe what I did?" he shouted. "God, If only we could be there, just to see it. I wonder what she's like. If she's anything like the nuns I recall, Sal's got two storms descending on him. Andrew will be the least of his troubles. He'll never believe we didn't plan it as a joke on him."

Charlie's up now, dancing his way to the bar. "My God Gwen, she'll be even more surprised than Sal. But, what can we do? I can't even get in touch with the Sister to, maybe, set up some alternate accommodation."

Drawing her chemise closer around her, Gwen's humor was quick and calculated to match his. "You could call tomorrow night and say: 'Forgive me Father...'" Chaz laughed and threw a damp bar rag as reward for her mischief - but he missed.

"Why not accept it as God's will?" Gwen added. "You're always saying that there are no coincidences."

"But, my God, Gwen, this is a first." He sighed and looked up, beseeching the

Almighty as he took another swig. “Dear God, how could you be a party this?” (No reply expected.)

Gwen chided, “Please stop referring to ‘God’ as if He had a part in your mistake. Actually, we should call and make amends. Maybe we could reach Sal before she arrives – to at least warn him?” Eyes wide, questioning, Gwen stood and moved to the bar to join in celebrating *his mistake*.

“Are you kidding?” Chaz cried. “I prefer the ‘God’s will’ route – not make a big deal over a little mistake. After all, this will be something the three of us – maybe four if we include our mystery nun – can get a big laugh over when we get back on Sunday. In the mean time, call it fate and let God handle it. Sal’s no kid. He can take care of himself. After all, in a way, they both belong to the same club, and if I know nuns, she’s probably old enough and sharp enough to handle the good Father.”

He became serious. “Actually, you know, when Sal and I last corresponded, he confided that the Bishop had been giving him a hard time. So, this could be a healthy diversion, right? What do you say, Gwen? Let’s just play dumb. We forgot. Sorry, I mean, I forgot.”

Putting on her best Vivien Leigh pout, Gwen stood and slid out of her chemise. “You’re right. I’ll think about that tomorrow,” she mimed. “Company, be damned. Let’s go in the bedroom and discuss other more important things, Rhett.”

Charlie dropped his cup and glasses off on the bar before hooking a finger into Gwen’s bra strap and letting her lead him. For good measure, he nuzzled the back of her neck as they moved in unison.

Left alone, the TV continued its CNN news coverage of the forthcoming election, suggesting that the young, virile Bill Clinton might just give old President Bush a run for his money in November...

