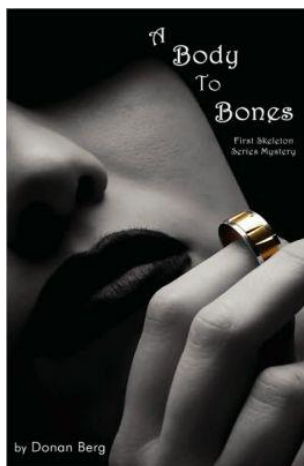




Sample from *A Body To Bones*
First Skeleton Mystery
By
Donan Berg

Sarah Hamilton, in judgment without mercy, berates herself for not living up to be her mother's 1950s ideal homemaker. Seldom does the twenty-seven-old leave her home, five rooms dedicated as the living quarters attached to the *Pioneer Ledger* weekly newspaper office.

Wife of *Pioneer Ledger* Publisher Thomas Hamilton, she expects all 842 Clinton, Iowa, residents to at least know of her. She ventures out most often into the next block to attend Mass and women circle activities at St. Mary's Catholic Church where the pastor is Father Cornelius Murphy, a handsome thirty-two year-old man dedicated to serving God and his parishioners, especially their kids.

Sarah's heart in 1951 aches with her mother's death. Ever since she prays she hasn't unknowingly betrayed her mother by a failure to achieve her mother's good-home goals. The first is an unquestioning trust in God. Sarah recalls her mother's prime example: a Catholic woman who marries a caring, wonderful Catholic man who earns a good income and does not stray. Mother bears three obedient, healthy children and thereafter provides a clean, healthy home with home-cooking and baked goods at every meal.

Traveling as a salesman, Sarah's father is home only weekends, and then she remembers he'd spend his time with her brothers. They never

spent time with mother, except to learn clean-up chores. They never cook or bake. Sarah learns her destiny is alongside mother.

The big crisis erupts when Sarah informs mother she's accepted Thomas's marriage proposal. When she adds Thomas is Lutheran, her mother cries for a week.

Mother pesters Sarah to know why she couldn't find a proper Catholic boy. The war's end means nice Catholic boys in need of wives are heading home. Thomas only partially mollifies Mother when Thomas agrees to have our wedding at St. Mary's Catholic Church. Mother predicts to family Sarah's marriage will not last.

Two years after her mother's death, mother's prediction looms. Sarah faces societal forces that challenges American women plus an American workforce decision never forced upon her mother.

Embarrassment lingers from her mother's teachings and Sarah speaks aloud to an empty room. "Excuse me, Lord, these recent years radio shows tell women sex is no longer limited to procreation. Between Thomas and I conflict begins, not with sex, but his asking me to perform newspaper work. I know mother would have me say no. So I tell Thomas 'no.' Disobedience conflicts me since mother preaches a wife owes complete obeisance to her husband."

Sarah's rejection of Thomas becomes the catalyst for future arguments, e.g., who answers the phone, or, who spends excess money on personal items.

As long as she refuses to leave the kitchen, the arguments continue. Watching TV becomes the way to avoid conversation. Not going to bed at the same time, as had always occurred, reduces, but does not eliminate intimacy.

Melissa's birth intensifies their marital tension. Thomas spends his time with Melissa, not Sarah.

She cries herself to sleep; loses twenty pounds; avoids others.

After weeks of never-ending argument and tension, Sarah leaves the kitchen to immerse myself in activities at St. Mary's. Church bake sales rise to be an enjoyable emotional outlet and baking honors her mother. Thomas argues church tasks are like working outside the home, but Sarah refuses to listen and accuses him of blasphemy.

Sarah basks in Father Murphy's kind and inspiring support. She toils to encourage donations to fulfill his dream of a church hall for the kids. Bake sales, raffles and church dinners raise thousands of dollars. After one event, she sees Father Murphy write numbers onto a paper slip he inserts into a Clinton Fifth State Bank bank book. A later time he places

bake sale proceeds into a special-account envelope he addresses to Mr. Godfrey Klempler, bank president.

She enjoys Father Murphy's spirituality and nonjudgmental aura. She comes to realize he hangs around with her after other women departed to fulfill family obligations. Sarah cherishes he listens to her. He praises daughters honoring mothers. He said he prays Thomas will understand God's law exists for a husband and wife to keep the home sacrosanct.

Then one night, Sarah gives him an innocent hug. It lasts longer than normal, but she's not ready to chastise herself. Thereafter she stays a respectful distance when others are present.

Sarah begins to long for Father Murphy's event appearance. Sunday afternoon proves to be a special time as the rectory housekeeper departs at noon. Thomas visits the baseball park on Sunday afternoons to watch the amateur baseball team play, youths practice softball or to observe people. He continues his routine with Melissa.

With the rectory next door to the church, Sarah finds it easy to stroll past and, if the street empty, to knock.

Cornelius Murphy's soothing words and confident demeanor put her at ease. In the rectory that first March Sunday afternoon, she sips the red wine he offers. Her gesture mimics weekly communion.

Her head whirls. She feels the aggressive touch of his hand under my overblouse. He caresses her clothed breasts, then her naked breasts so tenderly.

Sarah tries to squirm free. He pushes her onto on a divan, his weight allows him to pin her torso, lift her skirt and separate her legs.

Conflict whipsaws her thoughts. She longed for tenderness; not force. Sarah's protest lost. Soft kisses caress her lips as his fingers constrict her neck.

When she relaxes her chest, his unclosed hands fondle her breasts until his elbows part her knees and their thighs engage.

Tears stream her cheeks as her lower body, joined with his, enters the promised land of rolling thunder and joint climax..

His seed pulses inside her.

She whispers, "Thomas." Then summons every ounce of her strength to kick and jerk free.

Sarah rushes frantically to dress. Father Murphy extends his arms. Sarah shakes her head and promises herself to declare the rectory and Father Murphy off limits.

On her scurry home, she laments that in minutes she'd permanently stained Mother's honor and her own. Tormented by following Mother's

wish to say “no” to help Thomas; she hadn’t uttered the same word to Father Murphy.

Radio host words float within her brain. Today’s society advocates that engaging in sex without marriage is the new healthy reality, not to be suppressed.

Sarah’s experience convinces her she’s been betrayed. While the forbidden lust with Father Murphy exists as an absolute reality, she learns women’s lib pursuits lack love, commitment and the divine.

Did God watch? Sarah’s faith tells her the answer. Her Bible states an eye for an eye. Her penance must be to root out evil.

Two nights later, Sarah surprises Thomas and agrees to help out with the newspaper as long as she didn’t have to abandon her desire to create a clean, healthy and proper household. She prays Mother understands she wasn’t leaving her home to perform business work.

Sarah skips a church circle meeting, then a bake sale. She lies to avoid St. Mary’s, especially the rectory.

She succeeds . . . and then misses a menstrual period. Horror consumes her entire being. God had been watching.

Sarah awakes each day worthless, isolated. She lacks the courage to confess to Thomas. He knows they hadn’t been intimate for months before or after her Sunday afternoon with God’s priest.

A second missed period terrifies her.

Living the shell of a life, she sleeps more and takes long walks with Melissa to give Clinton residents the appearance of a doting mother with a first child. Thomas acts surprised when she offers to accompany him to First Lutheran Sunday services.

Grasping for answers, Sarah prays her trip to Winterville, twenty-files miles north of Clinton, promises a solution to the growing baby in her womb. She lies to Thomas one Thursday that Melissa needs a well-baby checkup. She hides her clinical appointment.

As she expects, after experiencing identical prenatal feelings she’d had with Melissa, to be told she’s pregnant. She ponders her will to be strong and terminate it. Her moment of lust violated Holy Catholic Church tenets; her sacred marriage vows and forced her into making a decision by herself that would violate her entire upbringing, principles and every moral value preached by her mother.

Sarah’s soul could no longer endure the painful irony of Mother pressuring her to find a Catholic man, and then her body ravished by a Catholic priest.

An overcrowded Winterville Clinic frustrates her, however, she embraces the ability to go unrecognized. She cries in the exam room when

the nurse tells her of her pregnancy. The nurse praises her happy tears, while Sarah refuses to unveil the truth.

She wipes at tears and places Melissa into the car to return to Clinton. Distracted by a receptionist lollipop, her daughter doesn't see Sarah cry.

Sarah persuades herself she will use the two week interval until she returns to the Winterville Clinic for a confirming blood test and possible "procedure" to determine how and when she'll confront Father Murphy.

If she tries what she contemplates, she requires help.

On the highway to Clinton she didn't observe the oncoming car swerve wide and into her path from an intersecting road until the last moment. She jerks the steering wheel hard right to avoid a collision. Breaking glass and metal on metal screeches represents the last sounds she hears. Later, she learns the driver drove drunk and his tire marks on the asphalt indicate excessive speed.

Not until the third hospital day did Sarah awake.

Her attending doctor tells her she was very lucky to be alive. He explains that part of her pain is from the hysterectomy necessary to save her life. While his words initially offer comfort, Sarah understands her ability to bear children no longer exists.

She curses her God for getting even.

Sarah collapses on the fourth day when Thomas breaks it to her that Melissa didn't survive the crash.

A wheelchair carries Sarah to St. Mary's first pew for Melissa's delayed funeral. A vacationing Father Murphy means a substitute priest officiates. The face veil in her lap goes unused.

The entire town turns out. Shops post "closed" signs for the Thursday morning funeral service. Sarah can't bear to read Melissa's obituary printed the next week in the *Pioneer Ledger*.

In a dozen weak moments after her disgrace, Satan encourages her revenge. She removes her rings for dish washing and dough kneading with a frequency that encourages her not to wear them as a silent symbolic reminder of her promise to make things right.

After several months, she forgets where she hid them.

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Father Murphy Missing

Village Voices Concern

For Absent Priest

There was mystery in town this past week as every citizen wondered about the disappearance of Father Cornelius Murphy, pastor of Clinton's St. Mary's Catholic Church.

He had been St. Mary's pastor for the past five years.

Local grocery store owner, Myron Goostree, Sr., was the last person to see Father Murphy a week ago Tuesday as the priest walked towards the parish rectory at 4:30 p.m.

No one in town has said they have seen the priest since then. Citizens are really puzzled as to what has happened. No one in town had ever heard anything bad about the priest, said one resident at the café this morning. He really liked kids and was always willing to help, said another resident.

Sheriff Ed Hendricks is investigating and his office said he had no comment until additional persons were talked to. His office declined further comment.

At press time on Tuesday, the whereabouts of the priest was still a mystery.

Mass will be at normal 10 a.m. time this Sunday with a substitute priest from Winterville traveling to St. Mary's.

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Thank you for your interest and please consider a review. All are appreciated.