

Excerpt from *Abbey Burning Love* By Donan Berg

IN THE FADING ILLINOIS TWILIGHT, Melissa Malone's right thumb spun the wristwatch minute hand backward. Despite a prayer, the rewind couldn't erase memories of ex-boyfriend Attorney Mark Brooks. When her gaze lifted from the 18-karat Everose-gold-encircled dial, she gasped. Mark scurried with long strides in her direction along the cedar-mulched garden path beneath The Abbey bell tower? Molars crunched a green-striped breath mint; it's aftertaste as unpleasant as the expected confrontation.

"Refusing my invitation was rude," Mark snarled. "I bought a table."

"Please, no new heartaches," Melissa whispered. She gazed up at the treasured gothic tower, a Boulder Isle landmark and her childhood escape and fantasy playhouse. She swallowed hard; her balance on heels unsteady.

Mark's muscular abdomen didn't bulge; what was that bump under his gray suit coat a right hand clamped tight? "Casting me off one thing; embarrassing me in public unnecessary salt to the wound." He bit into his lower lip as if to dam the venom Melissa expected. Within earshot, chattering escorted female gala arrivals, in floor-length satin bustier dresses and embroidered chiffon skirts bunched in clenched wedding-banded hands, tiptoed through dusty parking lot gravel to The Abbey ballroom entrance.

"Now's not the time or place."

"Lately, never is." Mark bumped Melissa's shoulder causing knees to twist as he strode off, elbows pinched to his sides. Without a caustic word, he faded into the darkness between a parked black Cadillac and Hummer.

Alerted by renewed gravel-crunching footsteps, Melissa clasped both hands behind her back to hide an elbow's non-tender, bumpy, red, stress rash.

"Find Rob Campbell?" friend Sarah, in a gala volunteer blue vest, asked. Melissa glanced left and right. "Who said I was looking for him?"

"C'mon. We in the thirty-plus lonesome sisterhood read minds."

"Tonight's money to stop the wrecking ball more important."

Above them, the scrolled, rust pockmarked, wrought iron hands of The Abbey tower clock's interlocked gears squeaked loud to foreclose Sarah's further probing. The cast-iron, massed bells rotated to chime seven times. The notes mesmerized Melissa. Trembling, she tried to rub warmth into her left forearm counteracting the chilly, freshening east breeze that filled her nostrils with roasted prime rib aromas wafting from kitchen exhaust vents. Exactly a week before Melissa waited in this exact spot with crossed fingers during a public health inspection that by three points reversed a prior failing stove safety grade, which would've canceled this evening's fund-raising gala.

"Whatever. Don't stew. What did Mark say?"

"Nothing worth repeating." Melissa hugged arms to chest.

"He, muttering who knows what, pivoted in the parking lot when he saw me. His eyes on a hand holding something important, hiding it under his coat."

"A gun?"

"Don't think so. See ya." Sarah started to jog away. "Got cars to park." Her slowdown shout to a BMW snatched Melissa's gaze across the parking lot toward a streetlight-silhouetted figure. Couldn't be Mark or Rob . . . too fat . . . too short. The figure's movement blocked by the stone Celtic cross saved by her eighty-three-year-old father during a lifetime dedicated to preserving the historical Western Illinois nunnery and beneficiary of tonight's festivities. Backstopped by 3,000 petition signatures gathered by Melissa and older sister Carol, Aleck Malone's singular force of will, and a threat to chain himself to the chapel doors, deflected the scheduled 2011 wrecking ball.

Achoo. Before spring ragweed allergy stuffiness plugged thirty-one-year-old air passageways, Melissa reached for a gold-chained black pearl-studded purse only to remember she left the purse, inhaler, and black silk gloves inside backstage. Her handheld Blackberry rang with the caller ID stating "Wally's Club." She couldn't report to her employment, not tonight, but still she answered. "Can't. Could I visit Pedro in the hospital tomorrow? Trust me. Leukemia isn't that fast acting."

Inside at the welcome desk, left hand clutched the Blackberry while her right hand exchanged handshakes with four donors and apologized a duty promised to Father beckoned. Quick steps on the balls of her feet and a helping handrail guided her to stage right curtains behind the stage's proscenium arch. Melissa's hand creased the corner stage curtain to peek at the audience. *Rob's in the ballroom. Where? Where is he?* Prior to going outside, she walked past his reserved table placard. The place setting's cloth napkin dropped on the table's empty chair seat. *What if she used the PA system to say he had a message? No, absolutely no.* She'd revisit Rob's table after she fulfilled her promise to Father she'd make him proud as fund-raiser MC.

A deep breath temporarily relaxed the stomach butterflies always flutter before she spoke to large groups. In the grand ballroom of Boulder Isle's The Abbey, tonight would be a critical debut to represent her family's passion for The Abbey. However, stepping out of the stage wing solved neither personal quest nor quelled the hundreds of furiously flapping butterflies churning a queasy stomach. The dazzling spotlight beam practically blinded her. She couldn't positively identify anyone beyond the third table row. However, Father sat front and center in the row closest to the stage apron, his outstretched hand and ear-to-ear toothy smile greeting big and small donors alike.

Following the announcement she'd be the Gala Chair, best friends Sarah and Alice nagged and challenged her to jettison a lackluster tailored pants suit image. Hours before she'd snipped price tags off a torso-clinging black mini. The stretch-scuba dress, like the fine leather racing gloves she ordered for driving in stock car competitions, embellished gentle curves with a tight fit. A duo of glittering diamonds embedded in a gold clasp retained long blond head hair twisted behind and slightly right of center. As grandmother and mother before, she wore the heirloom clasp proudly. An elegant, single-strand, pearl necklace matched a pair of pearl-stud earrings.

Black pantyhose, stretched around muscular thighs and well-developed calves, shimmered in the spotlight as the miniskirt hem visually elongated legs.

The nylon swished with each tottering step toward the center stage standing microphone. Journey completed, she wobbled ever so slightly on trimmed in black patent leather straw sandals with three-inch stiletto heels.

“Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please?” Jam-packed to the fire marshal limit, the guests slowly clamped their collective jaw. Three hundred pairs of eyes gazed at Melissa. Overhead ballroom lights dimmed and a yellowish spot of light encircled her body, center stage. She patiently waited, rocking imperceptibly back and forth trying to steady herself on the balls of her feet, and still she couldn’t catch a glimpse of the one attendee her heart longed for. “Ladies and gentlemen, thank you. I believe you all recognize me. I’m Melissa Malone, chair of this year’s forty-first fund-raising gala for The Abbey. I would like to thank each of you for coming and for what I know will be your generous monetary support. With your help, we’ll surpass the forty-five thousand dollars raised last year.” She glimpsed downward to bathe in Father’s warm smile. He occasionally failed to remember names of lifelong donors, but Melissa well understood his devotion to his beloved Abbey would never falter. He’d teared up that morning telling Melissa how his heart swelled with pride when she assumed his leadership role to preserve The Abbey.

From center stage, she heard the paneled-wood entrance door bang twice. Blaring, piercing police and fire department siren high notes startled her to the core. A queasy stomach knotted when the screeching sounds escalated louder and louder. She pivoted to gaze left into the stage wing where a woman’s hands collided in their frantic frenzy to locate light panel dimmers to power-up the main ballroom lights. Melissa gasped as the far wall spotlight glowed like a Fourth of July sparkler and sprayed flashes of light up, down, left, and right. A deafening sibilant crackling sound accompanied the rising crescendo of the spotlight’s housing vibration until it burnt out. Darkness enveloped Melissa. For several seconds, miniature light rings from the spotlight glare danced behind closed eyelids. Teary moisture aided refocusing eyes as fingertips rubbed both eye socket corners hard. Core panic welled in an instant. She could barely see fingertips or painted nails on an outstretched hand.

A voice bellowed from the ballroom floor: “There’s smoke in the kitchen.” A chorus of voices yelled, “Fire! The kitchen’s on fire.” Melissa sensed wild pandemonium replace the joyful chatter of friends gathered for an evening of festive good cheer. Shadowy ballroom guests below near the stage apron, outlined by the flickering glow of table candles, pushed, jostled, and shoved. In the narrow aisle between the first table row and the elevated stage deck, they bunched together in a centipede motion left toward a battery lighted exit sign.

Father, where are you? She couldn’t hear his voice or see him.

An earsplitting explosion pained Melissa’s eardrum. Beneath soles the rumble and creaks of uplifting and dropping ancient timbers combined to sway her left and right. Fine un-deciphered particles stung forehead and cheeks; she raised a forearm to protect both eyes. The crashing metal and glass boom heard before the screams she believed to be the spotlight. Frequent air gulps coated the mouth’s roof with a fine powder, which activated a gagging reflex. The airborne particles clogged nostrils. “Mary,” she shouted. “The lights! Where

are you?" No response. Gone too was access to an inhaler.

An oxygen-consuming heat blast deflated Melissa's lungs. Shouts carried to the stage announced the far ballroom wall had collapsed. Shrieks, moans, and groans ricocheted off ballroom surfaces suffocating each prior volley. Melissa's muscles tensed and a gripping head-to-toe paralysis immobilized her.

Flames flashed overhead.

In the ever-increasing density of a smoky haze, her brain separated two rays of light that entered the ballroom. Please be help, she prayed. Melissa wished she could cover eardrums from the screech and scrape sounds of chairs and tables pushed and dragged along the floor. A veil of heat descended, intensifying as it wrapped cheeks tighter and draped shoulders. Screams warning of falling ceiling debris echoed above gala attendees while a loud baritone voice pleading for calm resonated as from a megaphone.

Below one of the light rays, a helmeted fireman in full gear illuminated by a fire-flame flash popped out of the chokingly dense, smoky haze near the stage. A hose nozzle protruded from under his right arm.

Melissa's upper body pressured knees to buckle as calf muscles relaxed. Her right foot stepped forward, full weight on its ball with the extended leg absorbing tilted body weight. Blurry, fuzzy vision combined with building, choking black smoke to obscure where her foot landed. Ear canal activated balance reflexes signaled muscles and tendons to exert pressure onto the floor to prevent a stumble.

An unknown vise-like force compressed above pelvis cloth and skin, left and right. Without warning, the pressure subsided. An excessively stimulated brain failed to energize tightening larynx muscles as two imagined arms encircled the waist and emulated a boa constrictor to squeeze lower abs against her spine. From the rear a shoulder-to-shoulder force nudged and pushed forward. Before Melissa's face would lead a full body pancake onto the wooden stage floor, the arms, with thumbs locked into her bellybutton, jerked her stiff torso erect.

Smoke-filled air irritated lungs, parched eyeballs, super-heated skin, and stung nostrils. While Melissa struggled to prevent panic gulps from activating the throat's involuntary choking reflex, she kicked heels left, then right.

Nothing.

The clenched capturing hands didn't release.

No escape.

Roughly twisted by repositioned hands and momentarily rotating in midair, she perceived landing on a broad shoulder. Envisioned waist-grabbing hands now splayed fingers to stretch fibers covering nylon-clad hamstrings.

"Father," she tried to cry out and failed.

Flailing two arms, one fist struck and bounced off hardened muscle. Additional swings missed everything, created fruitless motion, and sapped strength close to exhaustion. Wiggling hips sped dizzying blood to saturated brain cells positioned by her captor closer to the floor than feet. The faster she thrashed, the harder abductor fingers and palms squeezed on thigh flesh, tightly compressing heat-flushed sweating feminine skin to bone.

A familiar door bang interrupted, once then louder. Legs extended, a right heel pierced an unknown object. Twirled once, she heard cloth tear . . .

End of Excerpt

Author Donan Berg of heartwarming romance, exciting mystery fame won Feathered Quill's First Place Gold Award for Romance with his *One Paper Heart*. His *Alexa's Gold* is in the top ten of popular romance books at www.authorsden.com. Visit Donan Berg's home page at both www.abodytobones.blogspot.com and www.authorsden.com/donanberg .

His multiple novels are at major online retailers.