

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*Praying the Rosary on Prom Night*

April 23, 1994

Lou Ferrigno's doppelganger, Eric Indelicato, stopped me for a hallway talk just before I entered my English classroom. "You get a prom date yet?"

I grit my teeth and shook my head. "I haven't heard the word 'No' so many times since the last time I listened to 'Nobody but Me' by the Human Beinz."

Eric frowned. "I thought you'd snatched Arwen away from that Polish beatnik guy."

"She dumped him, but not for me. None us are prom-bound now."

"Damn! I've been praying to Saint Jude for you to get laid for years. I thought the patron saint of lost causes was finally gonna come through. Anyway, what the hell is going on with this stupid prom? *You* can't get a prom date! *I* can't get a prom date."

*No way! The sex god of junior high, Eric Indelicato, can't get a prom date?* "You, too? I thought it was just me. I was starting to feel incurably unfuckable!"

Eric frowned the deepest frown I'd ever seen. "Check this out. The senior girls are all going to the prom, but they're not taking senior boys as their dates. As near as I can tell, the sexually active ones are taking their middle-aged sugar daddies with them, and the virgins are all bringing their first cousins! As of now, all the girls at this prom will be students from this school and all the guys will be from everywhere else *but* here. You know where that leaves you and me? Up shit's creek without a paddle! There ought to be a rule: Only students from here can attend!"

I massaged my jaw. "Middle-ages sugar daddies? I tried to bag me a cougar, but no dice."

"There's no precedent for a guy our age taking an older woman, but there's gonna be a shitload of girls taking hedge fund managers to this prom. I guess my best shot at going to a prom — any prom — is become a hedge fund manager and go with a teenage girl when I'm forty."

"I absolutely refuse to perpetuate this bullshit scenario. I won't

screw a future version of me out of going to the prom by cradle robbing a high school girl when I'm forty."

Eric shrugged. "I don't know. Right now, that's the best plan I've got to go to the prom — twenty years from now."

"I don't remember the prom in *Back to the Future* being like this," I grumbled. "Of course, we both know what the cousins are all about. Parents are worried their daughters will have sex with their prom dates, so they send them with a relative. I guess they're so strict because they remember Woodstock well, and don't want any of us kids having that kinda fun."

"That might not work," Indelicato said. "I know I'd do *my* cousin. She's hot as shit."

Mr. Hopkins walked past us into the classroom and said, "We're starting soon."

I held up a finger to ask for a minute more. "So, what do we do, Eric? Take *our* cousins?"

"I'm at a total loss, dude." Eric admitted. "I just don't get it. I'm handsome. I should have a date already. You? Put you in a suit? You're diesel! What the hell?"

*I'm 'diesel?' I'm genuinely touched. A compliment from Eric!* "That's nice of you to say, man. After twelve damn rejections, these girls got me thinking I look like Quasimodo."

"No, dude. You're, like, attractive and shit. No kidding."

"That's news to me. Interesting. Anyway, what the fuck are we supposed to do?"

"I got nothing," Eric said. "You're not going. I'm not. Cousins and dirty old men are."

"It'll be cool when we're shut out of the prom," I said breezily.

Eric patted me on the shoulder. "I know you're too Catholic for your own good, but we gotta make sure you and me don't spend prom night at home praying the rosary."

"Amen to that!" I exclaimed. "Hey, wait a minute. Why don't you ask Marina Dazzo?"

Eric laughed loudly. "Marina Dazzo? I haven't seen her in two years! You need to reset your brain clock and live in the present, not the past. This is 1994, not 1987!"

"You're right. I do tend to live in the past. Still, weren't you two good friends?"

Eric inclined his head, thinking. "Everyone else is asking out people who don't go to school here. I might as well, too! And Marina was just the sweetest, nicest Alpine ever. She'd probably say 'yes.'" Eric chucked me under the chin with his fist. "Rad idea, bro. I owe you."

This would be the first of two prom conversations that day. Improbably, the second conversation would be at a church, with a priest. That afternoon, I stepped into the rectory of St. Luke's and found Monsignor Tobin in his office. "I've heard whispers on the wind that you wanted to see me?"

Tobin rose from behind his desk to shake my hand. He gestured for me to sit in the chair across from him. "Speaking of whispers, I hear you wrote an excellent pro-life essay."

I was taken aback. "Who told you that?"

Tobin smiled enigmatically. "Rumor has it your pro-choice biology professor said it was the kindest, smartest pro-life essay she's ever read. Her husband liked it, too."

"Yeah, that's all true," I said. "Who told you that?"

"I have to be honest with you," he said. "I didn't just hear about it second-hand. I got a hold of a page and read it. I saw for myself that it was superb."

I snapped my fingers. "The draft page I forgot here the night I covered the phones."

Tobin looked at me over his steepled fingers. "Exactly."

I shifted in my seat. "Just so you know, I didn't want to write about that topic. I'm not comfortable writing about bleak, real-world themes. I prefer writing *Doctor Who* fan fiction."

Tobin shook his head in gentle disagreement. "You deal with harsh and important topics with intelligence and sensitivity. You should read your essay at World Youth Day, or on EWTN or Relevant Radio. If your writing is half as powerful as I suspect, you could wind up becoming an influential and well-paid member of the Legionaries of Christ. Or a Vatican press agent."

I looked down at my shoes. "It was only intended to be homework. Something private between me and my biology teacher. I never intended

to make it a public, political thing.”

Monsignor Tobin looked quizzically at me. “But it’s great! When can I read it all?”

“I kinda don’t have it anymore.” I clamped my eyes shut and grimaced. “I lost it.”

Tobin leaned back in his chair. “You must have it saved on your computer.”

“The file got deleted.”

“Passive voice sentence construction?” Monsignor Tobin finally understood. “‘The file got deleted.’ Who deleted it? You. Why would you destroy all print and electronic copies?”

“I’d rather not get into it,” I said evasively.

“Why not?”

My dang throat was dry again. I cleared it too loudly. “I was worried I was wrong.”

“But you weren’t wrong.”

“But I might be wrong.”

“But you aren’t.”

“I don’t want to be a villain in a dystopian science fiction story.”

Monsignor Tobin snorted. “Like *The Handmaid’s Tale*?”

I nodded. “I think so. I haven’t seen the movie or read the book yet, but I’ve heard of it.”

“*The Handmaid’s Tale* is just well-written propaganda.”

I raised both my eyebrows. “Like my biology essay?”

Monsignor Tobin snapped his fingers. “This has something to do with the prom!”

As a nervous tick, I ran my fingers back through my hair, like I was reapplying my morning hair gel. “I kept flipping through the essay during homeroom because I was proud of all the biology teacher’s comments. I left it on my desk for a minute when I ran out to use the restroom. When I got back, my friend Nancy was reading it and crying.”

Tobin’s expression mixed sympathy with disappointment and paternalism. “You’re unreliable when you’re around women. They manipulate you too easily.”

I held my head in my hands. “I hurt her. I think she’s probably had an abortion.”

“You moved her conscience!” Monsignor Tobin protested. “That’s a good thing!”

“It didn’t feel good.” I shook my head. “I’ve known her since kindergarten. She’s had a crush on me since sixth grade, when she saw my ‘Music of the Night’ solo. I’ve had a crush on her since ninth grade. I made her cry. A lot. I don’t think she even likes me anymore.”

“If Nancy can’t handle the truth, then you shouldn’t be friends with her. So, you made a mistake destroying the paper. No big deal. It is a mistake that can be rectified because you are still an excellent writer. Can you remember enough of it to reconstruct it from memory?”

In my mind’s eye, I saw the photograph of the late-term abortion Miss O’Sullivan passed around the class. Then Arwen appeared in my head, wearing a T-shirt that read “PRO-CHOICE” with the image of a bloody coat hanger on it. Images followed of Nancy gushing over my solos, crying thanks to my essay, and quailing at my prom invitation. “I don’t like it when girls cry. I cannot bring myself to reconstruct that essay. I shouldn’t have written it in the first place.”

Monsignor Tobin stared at me. “I can’t believe it. You of all people. You’re betraying your pro-life principals because you’re sad you aren’t going to the prom.”

I sat bolt upright in my seat. “Now, that is a bit harsh.”

“Are you really that weak? You’ll do anything to please this girl?”

I grit my teeth together. “That isn’t it, sir.”

“I thought you had stronger willpower than this. I thought you had integrity and principle. Instead, you just let these girls wrap you around their little fingers.”

I shook my head. “I’m a very stubborn person, sir. I do what I want to do when I want to do it and I think what I want to think. I am not a weathervane.”

“From where I’m sitting, I have doubts about both your conviction and your credibility.”

I scowled. “I have an overabundance of both conviction and credibility. They’re my defining traits. To be honest, I could do with a lot less conviction, but whaddaya gonna do?”

“Are you sure about that?” asked the monsignor. “I feel like you’ve collapsed on me like a house of cards. I expected better of you.”

I examined my chewed-down fingernails. “Let me see if I understand what you are saying to me, because I want to be clear on this. Are you saying my feelings of empathy and compassion for women suggests I have a lack of conviction as a practicing Catholic?”

“It does if your compassion is for perpetrators of maternal filicide. Empathy can be misguided and misplaced. There is such a thing as tough love, you know, just as there is a difference between right and wrong, and good and evil. You have to ask yourself where you stand: Are you a stalwart soldier of Christ, or will you falter in the presence of the devil?”

I crossed my arms in front of my chest and stared down Tobin. “I am a genuine Catholic, not a fake one. My compassion is for my sisters in Christ, who are fellow children of God. The problem we have here isn’t that I have compassion for women. The problem is that you don’t.”

April 25, 1994

Art classes were informal affairs in which a human model or still life object was placed in the front of the room each lesson. Instead of remaining in the more traditional seats at their desks, students positioned themselves all around, finding the right vantage point to view the subject of the day — be it on the floor, desks, bookshelves, or windowsills. We worked in a variety of media throughout the school year, including pencil, colored pencils, pastels, charcoal, and watercolor. On that day, we were drawing a vase of flowers positioned tastefully on a tablecloth-covered end table using pastels on Canson Mi-Teintes paper.

Nancy, Christina, and I sat in front of the windows, on low-laying bookshelves. This was the same Nancy that the monsignor and I had quarreled about, and the same duo of Nancy and Christina who had heckled Miss O’Sullivan as she told us brothel zombie tales. While Nancy and I hadn’t had a full conversation reconciling after she had

stumbled upon my essay, she did needle me the following day by saying in a demonic voice, “I think we should kill *all* the babies!” It was genuinely funny, but I was so worried I had done irreparable damage to our friendship that I gave the joke less of a laugh than it was worth. That was a week ago. Things had been better between all three of us since, but a degree of heaviness had failed to dissipate from the air around us.

As usual, the CD player in the back of the room played music provided by an array of students with vastly different musical taste. Since September, we had made our way through my rockabilly collection, Christina’s jazz catalogue, and Nancy’s *fantastic* proto-“Lilith Fair” playlist (including Indigo Girls, Mazzy Star, Ani DiFranco, Sarah McLachlan, and Melissa Etheridge). Over the course of the last few days, we had gone through Fernando Estrella’s metal archive: Iced Earth, Manowar, Iron Maiden, Blind Guardian, In Extremo, and Metallica. Today’s selection was “Master of Puppets.” The music was loud enough that, when Nancy and Christina spoke, their words went unheard by Mrs. Wasserman and the other students.

Mrs. Wasserman — a perky, pixie lady who could have played Tinker Bell on stage, or a Sandy-Duncan-style Peter Pan, or even Sandy Duncan herself — heaped praise upon our sketches before moving on to encourage all the artists’ efforts. I adored Mrs. Wasserman. Honestly, it was so nice to finally have an art teacher who would offer encouragement for a change. All my previous art teachers would do is say to us, “I failed as an artist, as will you,” and who needs that shit? What I needed, senior year of high school, was Mrs. Wasserman looking at my art and saying, “Beautiful! Keep going.” Her instructional philosophy was an early version of Lynda Barry’s: if the teacher makes teaching and learning seem like “play,” then students will learn more, and become more spiritually and psychologically fulfilled. Students just need to keep making art, having fun, and meditating. They should not give themselves an ulcer measuring the artistic quality of their output against Jackson Pollock and Frida Kahlo. Nor should they pit the potential profitability of their work against Jeff Koons and Jasper Johns. In my experience, those who study under this educational model find that their talents improve naturally, and they complete a higher percentage

of the works they begin. After studying with Mrs. Wasserman — and seeing my work improve steadily as my self-flagellating tendencies abated — I knew I wanted to be an educator like her.

My view of teaching was that the teacher's main role was to put widely respected, intellectually challenging, and potentially subversive materials in the hands of the students, help them understand what they might do with it, and stand back. The onus was on the student to improve and teach themselves based on the material provided. As a teacher, I would not worry much at all about establishing a meritocracy or holding students to the same uniform standards. If anything, I would evaluate each student based upon effort and progress, and that was all. If I made learning as much like play as possible, my students would learn to love education. They would choose to become lifelong learners of their own volition. Of course, I could opt to become the teaching equivalent of Gunnery Sergeant Hartman in *Full Metal Jacket*. I could make education into a Darwinian meritocracy and humiliate my own students. That would be an *excellent* way to ensure that my students would stop wanting to learn the instant they graduated. They would spend the rest of their lives leaving cable television on in their homes 24/7 as background noise, shut their brains down, and become exponentially dumber and angrier as they spent their declining years suckling the glass tit of fear. No thanks.

For their part, Christina and Nancy felt that teachers who abstained from pointing out their student's flaws left them rudderless, and without guidance. They were not fans of Mrs. Wasserman. When she called their work gorgeous, they'd roll their eyes. "What a surprise," Nancy grumbled to Christina. "Yours is beautiful! Mine is beautiful! Everyone's is beautiful!"

I smiled. "But yours is beautiful, and mine is beautiful, and everyone's is beautiful."

"If everything is beautiful, then nothing is," Christina replied.

I smirked. "I understand where you're coming from. I still say she rightly sees us as plants and gives us light, water, and love. She lets us grow on our own and in our own way."

"What about upholding standards?" Christina asked.



I made a face. “‘Uphold standards!’ The rallying cry of fascists. Fuck ‘standards.’”

Christina had a mock-scandalized look. “Preaching egalitarianism again, you RINO? You know I’m not a fascist, but I believe in intervening when the train is about to go off the rails.”

Nancy placed an affectionate hand on mine. “Damien is the nicest person in the world who listens to Rush Limbaugh every day.”

I cleared my throat. I was doing that a lot lately. “He isn’t hard on Catholics. I appreciate that. But I stopped listening to him when he kept peddling conspiracy theories about the Clintons murdering Vince Foster. That kinda crap isn’t for me.”

“That’s a relief to hear, actually,” Nancy said. “I was thunderstruck that you liked him.”

“He was funny for a while. Then he got really mean. I do funny. I don’t do mean.”

“Yes,” Christina nodded. “On a directly related front, there was something we wanted to talk to you about, Damien. Problem is, we know you have a lot of pride and we don’t want to insult you. There’s big potential for putting an asteroid-sized crater in your ego.”

My spider-sense tingled. “Oh? Well, then, please feel free to not broach the subject.”

Nancy added, “We would be trying to help, but I give it good odds you’ll want to punch us in the face after we say what we plan to say. Please try to understand that we aren’t teasing or attacking you. This is a loving, friendly, sisterly intervention. Cross our hearts.”

“‘Intervention?’ Like for alcoholics?” I took the handkerchief out of my pocket and dabbed away sweat on my forehead. “How did this conversation get so alarming, so fast?”

Nancy patted my hand again. “We heard you’re having trouble getting a prom date, and we’re upset about it, because you deserve to go to the prom. Then we started thinking about *why* you’re having so much trouble. There’s really only one possible explanation.”

“‘On a directly related front?’” I snapped my fingers. “Aha! I’m too reactionary to date. Like the bumper sticker says: Just Say ‘No’ to Sex with Pro-Lifers! Very *Lysistrata*. I approve.”

Christina avoided my eyes.

I spoke as low as I could and still be heard over the heavy metal. “Nancy, I’m really sorry you read my essay. I shouldn’t have written it or left it out where you could find it.”

Nancy bit her lower lip.

“I mean it,” I said.

“I know,” said Nancy. “Thank you.”

Christina slipped me a phone number scrawled on a scrap of paper.

“What’s this?”

“I know a girl named Amanda,” Christina said. “You’d like her.”

“A blind date?” I arched an eyebrow. “You’ll subject a friend to a crazy right-winger?”

“Oh, stop it,” Nancy jumped in. “Anyway, she’s gorgeous. Looks like Marisa Tomei.”

“Yo! If she looks half as good as Marisa Tomei, fucking fuggedaboudit!”

“She’s twenty-five,” Christina added. “She’s fantastic. So smart and nice and funny.”

I exhaled sharply though my large nose. “What’s the catch? What aren’t you telling me?”

Nancy held up a finger to stop Christina from talking. “I’ve changed my mind. We can’t do this.” Nancy looked apologetically at me. “You don’t want that phone number.”

“We’ve come this far,” Christina said. “We can’t put the toothpaste back in the tube.”

Nancy’s voice became urgent. “We have to. He’s not gonna take this in the right spirit.”

“Hello?” I waved. “Remember me? This isn’t a bloody call girl, is it?”

Christina adopted a more manic and enthusiastic tone to talk up the plan. “Here’s the deal: Amanda is a big-hearted nymphomaniac with a crippling AIDS phobia.”

“She’s a what, what, and a *what*?” My eyes bulged. “I was not expecting that sentence.”

“She loves having penises inside her but hates the way condoms feel. No matter what, she can’t get off with latex. So, she’s in a pickle.”

“When she’d prefer that the pickle be in her?” I asked. “An unsheathed pickle?”

“Exactly!” Ridiculously, Christina gave me a thumbs up. “You see how it is? The only way she feels safe having sex bareback is if she knows for a fact that the person she’s fucking has never been laid before. Also, if he’s a virgin, he needs to be old enough to be of legal age so she doesn’t get arrested for statutory rape. You fit the bill perfectly. You are of age, a virgin, and would appreciate her sex tutoring you. You even have a cougar fetish! Bonus! Meanwhile, she gets to have your penis inside her without a condom on it. Many times.”

“Many times?” I asked.

“She’s had flings that have lasted anywhere from a week to three months, so you could wind up pumping her for a good spell, if she sees your ability to please her improve steadily after what would understandably be rock-bottom performance early on.”

Christina nodded vigorously. “Nancy and I have shown her a picture of you and she says you are way, way more attractive than the guy she’s boning now. She’s bored and ready for . . .”

“ . . . a new penis?” I asked sarcastically.

Christina ignored me. “Listen, she is kind and discrete and she loves more than anything educating sensitive, inexperienced men how to be good lovers. She’d eat you up with a spoon.”

One of the songs on the CD ended abruptly. Nobody noticed I was staring, ashen, at Nancy and Christina, and they were smiling nervously back at me. The next song began.

“I dunno,” I grumbled. “I’ve already seen a training video. I may be good to go. I’ll sit around waiting for someone who actually *loves me* to show up and . . . um . . . deflower me.”

Nancy giggled nervously. “It was worth a try! Thanks for being a sport, Damien! See, Christina? Told ya he’d pass on the offer. Let’s talk about something else before he throttles us.”

Christina frowned. “We’re trying to help him! He must see that.”

I looked back and forth between them. “I guess you two cooked this scheme up together to fix me? Make me less uptight? You know . . . Amanda probably *would* fix me. Yep. She probably would.” My eyes reddened. “Make me less stodgy. Reactionary. Male chauvinist.”

Nancy reached out to touch my hand again but stopped herself, frightened to do the wrong thing. “Now I owe you the apology. I

promise you, I meant well.”

Mortified, I wiped the one tear away and tried to blink back any further ones.

Nancy said. “Please let me explain. We were there when Miss O’Sullivan showed you those abortion photos and batted her eyelashes at you. She did some serious psychological damage to you, man. We saw it with our own two fucking eyes. It’s tough, because she had that banging figure and me and Nancy ain’t nothin’ to write home about, but we wanted to do something to get you out of her clutches. And then the way she snubbed you recently? And was *scared* of you? When you told us that story, we were so mad at her! So mad! And your bad luck getting a prom date? That’s the worst! Why won’t anyone go to a frickin’ dance with you? *Nobody*? And you being jerked around like a puppet by Arwen with the ‘she loves me, she loves me not’ horseshit, because she’s a greedy little whore who needs to crush you like a bug so she can have her chocolate factory? Fuck all that! So, now seemed like the time to approach you with this plan. You see, we see that you’re lonely and suffering. We care about you, ya know!”

“I know. That’s part of what makes this so hard for me.” I was embarrassed that my voice quivered a little as I said this. “That you do care, and this is the best plan you could think of.”

Nancy slapped Christina across the shoulder violently enough for a couple of students nearby to notice our conversation was going south fast. Leaning in, she whisper-hissed at Christina. “You are such an asshole, Christina.”

“You’re such a whole ass,” Christina hissed back.

“How’s about you French kiss my bunghole?” asked Nancy.

“How’s about you eat my entire ass?” asked Christina.

“Fuck you and the horse you rode in on,” said Nancy.

“Yo, you leave my horse outta this. My horse didn’t do nothin’ to you!”

Nancy returned her attention to me. “You okay over there, dude?”

I shrugged, looking drained and defeated. “I imagined my first time would be with someone I was in love with and who loved me. I guess that’s a pretty quaint notion, huh? I can’t help but think if you two really cared about me, at least one of you would be willing to go

to the prom with me. Fool around after. But, no. Your master plan is to fob me off on some nympho I've never met instead of making a man out of me yourselves?"

"Oh, fuck you," Nancy whispered. "Why the fuck should I try to 'fix' you with sex? That's never a good plan for *any* woman. Too much risk, responsibility, and self-sacrifice is involved. And what's my incentive? Especially after I read your friggin' essay!"

"I suppose not much," I admitted.

Nancy crossed her arms in front of her chest. "If men want there to be fewer abortions, they shouldn't put more chains on women. We've got enough chains on us as it is. They should just get a reversible vasectomy, or wear a condom, or pull out when they say they're gonna pull out. Even better, maybe stop raping strangers, dates, and their own daughters. None of us are pumped to get abortions. We do it because men are assholes who put us in a predicament and vanish in a puff of smoke. Or men keep us prisoners in our own homes and rape us nightly. There's your solution to the abortion problem, right there. Stop blaming women for shit men do."

I felt dizzy and leaned back against the closed window. "I hadn't thought of it that way."

"And a fetus has rights that a woman doesn't? And corporations are considered people under the law and women aren't? To hell with the whole goddamn system, man! It reeks. And let's say you and me do go to pound town. How would that play out? Would you take Miss O'Sullivan's advice? Pray the rosary before you slide inside me? Whether you do or not, three minutes after we're done, you'll curse me for taking your purity and damning your soul!"

I couldn't bring myself to look at Nancy, so I cast my eyes down to the dirty, tiled floor. "That's not an unrealistic fear. Honestly, I have no idea how I'd feel afterwards. Since I've never had sex before, how could I possibly predict what the experience would do to me? I'd like to think it's not a foregone conclusion I'd treat you like shit afterwards."

Nancy sighed. "I'm not hopeful you'd react well. I'm sorry. I'd love to have sex with you. I really would. I think you're delectably nerdy. That's a real thing, you know: Geeky hot."

“Well, that’s great!” I sat up straight. “Why didn’t you tell me that before?”

She closed her eyes and held up her hand to silence me. “Just imagine if our condom broke and you knocked me up. That would be a tragedy of epic motherfucking proportions.”

“But what if it didn’t break?” I asked. “We can get the Consumer Reports condom issue.”

Christina gave me a warning look. “Take the wax out of your ears, dude. She said ‘no’ and she meant ‘no.’ Listen up. You’ve got us all wrong. We’re not jerks here. I’m not attracted to you, but I like you. Nancy wants your body, but you scare her shitless. So . . . we thought Amanda was the best of a bad buncha options. In case you didn’t figure this out yourself, there’s no easy way out of your particular problem.”

“I wish you’d both had more faith in me.” I handed Nancy the crumpled scrap of paper with Amanda’s phone number on it. “And I wish this had been your phone number.”