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HIDE-OUT

by Arnell Larsen

Mission Santa Barbara lay basking in the sunshine. Several small groups of adults and children had arrived, tourists waiting to be shown the Mission. They congregated in the shop that sold religious articles, waiting near the sign that told when the next guided tour would begin.

A priest sat in a large wooden chair on the portico, the cool sea breezes stirring his white hair under the brown cap. The rising and falling of organ music was heard in the background as he watched the public arrive and depart.

Every ninety minutes or so, a new tour would commence and during the long afternoon the priest left his chair only a few times. The afternoon shadows were lengthening and he had just blessed a Saint Christopher for a gentleman when he noticed the shiny car come tearing up the highway toward the Mission. With a screeching of brakes it pulled into the parking lot, narrowly missing two other cars. The priest was curious and leaned forward in his chair. He thought for a moment that the car was going to keep moving and smash itself into the large stone cross in front of the Mission.

The priest saw only one man, the driver, stop the car. and then slump across the steering wheel. The horn began to blow at a steady volume.

The blaring of the car horn disturbed Brother Florian as he cleared his throat and commenced to speak of the final tour for the day. He saw the small group of people become agitated and glance toward the parking lot. He looked in that direction also, and the sight of the man in the automobile, even from a distance, drew him into action. He turned to another brown-garbed figure standing by the door.

«Brother Dermot, will you please conduct this tour for me, I have an important matter to attend to.»

Brother Dermot nodded in agreement and took Brother Florian's place at the head of the group. Brother Florian raced across the portico, his white cincture swinging at his side. His sandaled feet slapped upon the hard stones of the steps as he ran down them and after the priest ahead of him who was hurrying toward the car and the noise it was producing.

«Father Jordan, do not trouble yourself, I will find out what is the matter?» He hurried up to the elderly man.

«Oh, Brother Florian, how good of you to be so concerned. Do you know the gentleman who is sounding the horn? He looks like he has fainted.»

«Yes, he was a friend of mine at one time, I believe. Now go back into the shade and sit down. I will see what is the trouble.»

«Very well, Brother Florian. I do hope your friend is not sick.» He turned and headed back. «Do not be too long, it will soon be time for Vesper.»

«I will not, Father Jordan.»

Brother Florian approached the car cautiously. All the windows were down and he could see the side and back of the man slumped over the steering wheel, one arm dangling down limply. He did not know whether he was dead or alive. He wondered whether he was doing right in interfering. But the insane noise of the car horn was deafening.

The Brother yanked open the car door, pulled the man's weight off of the steering wheel and leaned him back against the seat. The sound of the horn diminished so quickly it was disturbing. The Brother eased his arm and hand out from the back of the man and felt dampness upon it. He looked down in horror to see the wet smears of blood.

«Hi ya, Frank, I finally came back to you, didn't I?»

The Brother looked up quickly at the familiar voice. «Hal... Hal...» He sobered up. «I am Brother Florian now...» then his manner relaxed, «why, why did you come here?»

«To die.» His lolling head raised itself up and he looked at the Brother of the Church. «The cops shot me and I came here to your Mission for sanctuary, but I'm dying, I know it. I'll beat the cops yet, they'll never take me alive...» He spoke with a sneer.

«You are hurt bad... in your back, your suit is soaked with blood in patches. Let me take you into the Mission, you must have medical attention right away. Perhaps you are wrong, Hal. Maybe you will not die.»

«I want to die, I've got to. I have nothin' left to live for. I'll finish the job myself before I'll let them send me off again.»

«Will you let me take you into the Mission?»

«Yeah, sure. The cops will find me here soon enough, anyway, hell, let them hunt for me in the Mission. Maybe you can find a place to hide me?» The injured man allowed himself to be pulled from the car seat and onto his feet on the ground. He leaned heavily against the Brother with one arm about his shoulders. Blood ran down his limp right arm and dripped from his fingertips. «Ahh, oh-h-h, the pain,» the sonofabitchin' pain.»

«I am sorry, Hal, I am trying to be as careful as I can.»

«Forget my complaining, you're doing okay,» he spoke through clenched teeth. «We must be makin' quite a scene, are there people watching us?» He could not raise his head up.

«I see no one watching us. Father Jordan is about to conduct Vesper and the people on the tour must be in the sacred garden by now.»

«Those damn cops, those sonofabitching bastards!»

«Do not swear. God hates it and men are corrupted by it.»

«Sorry, Brother Florian. I keep forgetting myself. I guess I shouldn't think of the past and the love we had.»

The Brother changed the subject immediately. «Why did the police fire upon you?»

«For the same reason we split up and went our separate ways. Oh, I guess I hit close to home again,» he leered, «I felt you stiffen up that time. Look, look, I'm getting blood all over your robe.»

«The stairs are here, take them slow and easy.»

«Look, I bet it's hard for you too, bein' so close to a no-good like me, again. Leave me on the stinkin' steps and go on to your service. I'll end it all with the rod in my pocket before the cops get here.»

«There are only a few more steps, take them one by one now. You have no gun on you, it fell from your pocket as you got out and I kicked it under the car.»

«But you can't do that to me, Frank.» Panic was in his voice. «You can't deny me my one escape.»

«You will not die by your own hand. That is the coward's way out, Hal, and suicides go to Hell.»

«Well where do you think I'm going? Do you think I've led such a sweet and holy life?»

«Do not scream so, else the women in the shop will hear you.» The Brother led the fugitive down the rough stone walk of the portico. «Perhaps with God's help I can save your life and you will be safe here. Why do you believe the police will come to Santa Barbara Mission to find you?»

«They know what my car looks like, they've got the licence number. They shot holes through the back window and I think one of the tires got it. It's a question of time, baby, before they find the car and I *was* heading in this direction.»

«How did you provoke them?»

«Robbery, what else? I thought a little dinky town like this would be a cinch, but I thought wrong again. After I broke in, I dropped my loot coming out when some guard or cop shot me in the back twice too, the dirty bastard!»

«Quickly, here, into the music room, a Brother is coming down the walk.» Brother Florian hurried Hal into one of the old adobe rooms of the Mission. «Hang onto the glass cabinet here for support and wait for me. I am going to get bandages and antiseptic powder for your wounds. I believe I can get back before you will be discovered. If you cry out, you are lost. Stuff a handkerchief into your mouth if the pain is too great.» The blond-haired, blue-eyed Brother slipped out and into the monastery on his appointed task. He was in deep thought as he hurried.

Why did Hal come back here, especially here to me? I have renounced my past and all of those connected with it. I live only for God and the future now. Hal, Hal, why did you come back to me, why? Was it God's will?

The wounded Hal looked about him, at the walls and into the cabinets of the old Padres music room. He saw yellowing pages of music script with the notes carefully drawn in with different colors. I guess the Indians must know then which color belongs to which singer, he imagined. He saw antiquated guns, a dilapidated piano, Spanish sabres, old prayer cloths for altars and tarnished candle sticks. Carved wooden crucifixes were worm-eaten and oil paintings of the different Missions hung about the walls up near the ceiling along with reproductions of the Padres.

Hal ran a hand through his crew-cut brown hair and wiped the sweat off of his pasty white face. He trembled a little inside, his back was growing more numb all the time. He wished that Frank would hurry back for he thought he

might be dying on his feet now. Hal heard someone coming and fearing that it might not be his onetime love, he hauled himself agonizingly into the next room where there was no door leading out onto the portico. He flattened himself out against the wall by the barred window in case the passerby should glance in and see him.

He heard the man walk by and he found himself staring at the remaining paintings of the Missions, noticing that the last one was smaller than the rest. He felt himself growing weaker by the minute. Why didn't Frank come on, he couldn't have dropped me, he thought. Then he was startled when he suddenly heard the chorus of male voices rise up in a hymn. It was beautiful, it frightened him, his heart pounded harder.

Veni Creator. Vespers have already started without me. Brother Florian told himself as he hurried along with a medical kit. He tripped and almost fell when he stubbed his toe on a raised flagstone. He winced in pain but kept going. *They have begun Vespers already and that is good and also bad. They will wonder what has happened to me and seek me out, but they will be occupied for a short while and that will give me time to plan the next move. Dear Lord, I pray that I am doing the right thing.*

Hal heard the soft footfalls coming toward him from the music room and figured that it must be Frank returning. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the Brother.

«You moved. For a moment I thought you had gone back to the car.»

«Someone came by so I hid in this room.» He glanced down at the medical kit. «You don't think that's going to do me any good, do you? I've got two bullets in me, Frank — Brother, bullets that are *killing* me by degrees. I haven't got a chance.»

«You are suffering, I surely can bring you some relief?»

«Yes, you can, the gun that is under the car,» In demanding tones.

Brother Florian frowned. «You are talking nonsense again. The pain makes you want to die. Come into the old Mission kitchen where there is more light. I will see what I can do for you.»

It was brighter in the larger room they entered and Brother Florian sat the injured man down upon a large, flat stone disc. It raised him only a little from the rough flooring, but elevated him up enough for the Brother's satisfaction as he squatted down behind the man and helped him off with his ruined coat.

«What did they use this old relic for, a wheel on a cart?»

«You are sitting on a grinding stone. It was turned about by cattle to grind the grain into flour.» He pulled gently at the blood-soaked shirt, trying not to pull off any formations of blood clots. He stared at the torn skin, at the gaping, ugly wounds and for one moment, he thought he was going to be sick. He realized he could not be of much help, what the man needed was immediate surgery and even then, it looked like it would be too late. He raised his head and heard his Brother Franciscans singing *Jesu Dulcis*.

«What is the matter, why are you so quiet, Brother?» The way he said 'brother' made it sound like a dirty word.

«Your back is in a very bad condition. Let me get you an ambulance before it is too late.» He rose to his sandaled feet.

«No!» In pain, Hal grabbed the Brother's arm and pulled him down to him. «No. Do what you can. I'm going to kick the bucket *here*. I'm not going back to any jail.»

«I cannot force you to go against your wishes. I can only beg you to reconsider and if you will not, I will help you to the best of my ability and pray for you.»

«You just *do* that, now.» Hal coughed.

Opening the medical kit, Brother Florian took out antiseptic powder, sealed packets of gauze squares and adhesive tape. «This will not ease the pain, only keep the germs out and perhaps let the blood clot more.»

Hal tried to change the subject. «What happened to the twenty-first painting of the Missions? How come it's smaller than the rest?»

«It was stolen. Someone came in the night and robbed the Church of it.» The Brother paused in placing the gauze on the man's back. Why had he not thought first before speaking. «The painter could not obtain any more of the original large canvases at that time so he had to make use of a smaller one.»

«And now you're trying to bring relief to a modern day thief who steals jewelry and money, huh? I am surprised that you haven't quoted to me the commandment '*Thou shalt not steal*'.»

The Brother pretended not to notice what was being said. He cut long strips of tape.

«Sorry, I shouldn't have said that to you that way.»

«What did you say?»

Hal knew that the Brother had heard him but did not press the subject. As he felt the tape being forced to his back, he heard the Brother hum softly to himself the tune the male choir was singing in the distance. «What's that you're humming?»

«*Tantum Ergo*. It is a Gregorian Chant. It is the time of Vespers.»

«And I've made you miss them, I know.» Hal coughed again and the pain was sudden and spasmodic. «Who... who was Saint Francis?» He could not let the Brother know he was growing weaker.

«Saint Francis of Assisi?» As he closed the lid of the medical kit, Brother Florian smiled. «He was God's little Minstrel. In cities and markets, on the seashores and in the forests, he sang and preached the word of God and he dressed exactly as I am dressed. He had a fondness for songs and laughter and a great love for animals. Beneath the blue sky he sang the praises of God, holding two pieces of branches like a violin and bow. This wonderful spirit of his, his love for songs was given to his Sons, the Order of Friars Minor, now known as the Franciscans. Since then, we too have learned to raise our voices in prayerful songs to God. Saint Francis of Assisi has said of us then, '*We are the Minstrels of the Lord whose work is to lift up people's hearts and move them to spiritual gladness*'. We are the sons of Saint Francis.»

«And now, what's that they're singing, the tune's changed?»

Brother Florian listened. «That is *Salve Mater*. Come, if you are strong enough yet, let us go where we can hear better.» He helped the wounded man to his feet and Hal groaned a little. They moved through the doorway and out of the kitchen.

«But this is the way to the Church where they're singing. We're not going in there, are we?» He felt panicky, his eyes rolled.

«No. This is a narrow passage that skirts the chapel and we are going into the sacred garden of the Mission.»

From the small doorway they came out into the high-walled, enclosed garden. The plants and trees cast their evening shadows before them as the sun was

setting. They moved along the gravel path, past tall hedges and found a stone bench to sit upon that was surrounded by flowering shrubbery. The hymns of Vespers floated out clearer to them now.

The robber leaned heavily against the Franciscan for he was at the point of exhaustion from even so short a walk. «Look, that, that!» He pointed with a shaky hand to the doorway leading into the Church and to the three sets of skulls and crossbones decorating the arch of the doorway.

«The middle one at the top is false, the other two skulls are real. But I do not know whether they are of the Padres or Indians.»

«I wonder what they see?» Hal's talk was becoming more senseless. «What are those block-shaped white things along the church walls?»

«Those are tombs of the Church Fathers, and some Chumash Indians are buried in them also. Behind us and partly hidden by the trees stands a large stone crucifix.»

Spots swam before Hal's vision now, blood-red spots and he keeled over and into Brother Florian's lap.

«Hal, Hal!» The Brother shook his shoulder gently and then noticed the seeping of the blood through the bandages and into the shirt again. «Mother of God, do not let him die here, in my arms.» He turned his face upwards.

«It's all right,» Hal spoke weakly. «I haven't kicked the bucket yet. But I couldn't . . . couldn't think of a better place to die than in your arms.»

«Let me call for help, Hal, you're dying . . .»

«No! You promised me, no . . .»

Brother Florian heard *Salve Regina* sung as his lips moved in a silent prayer.

«Remember Frank . . . remember how we met and fell in love and how we were going to show all the other friends of ours how we were going to stay together twice as long as any of them could . . .»

I don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, help me to forget my past, help me, God.

« . . . and the water pipes, the damn water pipes would always rattle in that little flat we had and you were working in a florist shop while I had that crummy job in the factory and would come home dirty and tired and twenty-eight bucks a week for a pay check. You told me, Frank, that things would get better, remember, that it wouldn't always be like that,» he spoke into the brown cloth of the Brother's habit.



«I'd drink and shot crap and try to make a fast buck so you wouldn't go hungry 'cause your pay all went for the rent so they wouldn't throw us out,» Hal was crying now and Brother Florian let him speak on and smoothed back his damp hair from his feverish forehead. He half listened to Hal and half listened to the chant of *Ave Maris Stella*.

«... and that bastard who taught me how to rob and get away with it and for a long time I wouldn't tell you where the money was coming from... and you threatened to leave me... and you started going more often to Church... and I found other loves and told you where to go... and then you left me... and then I did more robbing and went to prison... and I couldn't find you when I got out and I wanted you so much... nobody knew where you went off to... and I was broken and being kept... and then I went back to robbing again and a friend told me he knew you were thinkin' of going into a monastery out in California... and I made a big haul and I came here hunting for you 'cause I loved cou... it took me two years to find you... but I couldn't leave the damn jewelry store alone long enough to meet you again... and I was just going to see if you were happy, that's all... and I was going to leave you without you seeing me, knowing that you were okay and happy in your new life... you always was the gentle one and wouldn't even hurt a fly... oh, I'm caught up at last, Frank, I'm caught up...» Hal coughed and bright red blood splattered from his mouth and down on the Brother's brown habit and sandaled foot.

«Hush, hush, lie still now.»

«Turn me over, hold me in your arms and sing to me, huh, comon.»

Brother Florian waited a second until the next chant would begin and he sang softly to the dying man.

«Lord — Grant that I may seek... Rather to comfort... than to be comforted, to understand... than to be understood, to love... and to be loved. For it is by giving... that one receives, it is by self-forgetting... that one finds, it is by forgiving... that one is forgiven, it is by dying... that one awakens to... eternal... life...»

«*It's getting dark, it's getting dark!*» Hal cried out as he struggled in the Brother's arms. He vomited up blood in a haemorrhage and fell back into the Brother's arms in death.

Brother Florian raised the body up and pressed it to him in one last embrace and he turned his face to Heaven, saying, «Lord Jesus receive his spirit, oh, my Lord Jesus forgive me for running away from life, from love, forgive me, forgive me...» He bent his head and brought it closer and closer to Hal's and pressed his lips to the blood-wet lips.

It is by forgiving... that one is forgiven... It is by dying... that one awakens to... eternal... life...

As the voices of the male choir died away, the hushed evening air was split by the screaming of sirens and their approaching sounds drifted over the high wall and into the sacred garden.

«They are coming, Hal, but you said that you would escape them and you did. They will never catch you now.»

The police cars, taking extreme caution, drove up to the sanctuary of the Franciscans, to the old Mission of Santa Barbara.