

AN EVAN DELANEY THRILLER



MEG
GARDINER

PARADISE CAN BE HELL ON EARTH

CHINA LAKE

One

Peter Wyoming didn't shake hands with people, he hit them with his presence like a rock fired from a slingshot. He was a human nail, lean and straight with brush-cut hair, and when I first saw him he was carrying a picket sign and enough rage to scorch the ground. The sign read *God Hates Sluts* and he held it erect in his fist, aimed so mourners read it as we stepped from the church into the autumn sunshine. Behind him, his followers hoisted other placards. *AIDS Cures Whores. Sex Ed = AIDS = Damnation.* Ahead, the dead woman's daughter walked behind the casket, gripping her husband's hand for support. When Wyoming saw her, he began chanting.

"Hey, hey, what do you say? Claudine burns in hell today!"

That's when I made my first mistake. I took him for a grandstander, a bigot, a man who, from the looks of his sign, had trouble with women. And I underestimated him.

Wyoming was the pastor of a church called The Remnant, which proclaimed itself the last swatch of godliness in a pustulating world. They thought Santa Barbara, this postcard city of acrylic blue skies and red tile roofs, of coffee bars and beaches and Mexican-American warmth, was a sluice gate on the sewer pipe to Hell. They liked to drive home the point by jeering at AIDS funerals.

We ignored them. The dead woman's daughter, Nikki Vincent, had known they were coming and told us to treat them like they were invisible. Treat them like roaches underfoot.

Now Nikki laid a coffee-brown hand on the coffin. Saying, don't worry, Mom, I'll take care of you. Or maybe drawing strength from her mother, one last time. Claudine Girard had never backed down from anything. A small woman with a Haitian French accent, she was an AIDS activist even before the disease raked into her. She had also been my university professor, who salted her literature classes with commands to stand straight and belly up to life. Her death seemed impossible.

She had been well known in Santa Barbara, and reporters were clustering outside the Spanish-style church, under palm trees shirring in the breeze. They looked eager for action. Wyoming, anxious to supply it, tightened his bolo tie and stared at Nikki – seven months pregnant, holding onto her husband's arm and Claudine's coffin, ready to run the gauntlet.

He raised his sign. "Ding dong, the witch is dead! Which old witch?"

The Remnant shouted, "The voodoo witch!"

It was twenty yards to the hearse, waiting at the curb; a long way. The funeral director, usually all smooth inconspicuous moves and black-suited calm, clasped his hands in dismay. Confrontational funerals were poor advertising for the Elysian Glen Mortuary. He urged the pallbearers forward. Nikki lifted her chin and followed, her face like varnished wood, sunglasses hiding her swollen eyes.

A snub-nosed woman jutted forward from the crowd. "Slut lovers! Queer lovers! Take your mumbo-jumbo back to Haiti!"

Mourners deliberately looked past the protesters. We were a mixed bag – academics rumped in grief, Claudine's Caribbean family, and friends like me, with my Celtic looks, middle class manners, and bitten-back shock. My own religion was a subterranean Catholicism that welled up for deaths and holidays. God-as-stinkbomb was a novelty to me. I felt myself fraying, but for Nikki's sake I kept walking, looking into the distance where the October air shimmered over the Santa Ynez mountains.

Peeved that we weren't responding to them, a crew-cut young man with acne pointed at Nikki. "We're talking to you, witch girl!"

That blew it. Nikki's husband Carl, who had the heart and temper of an accountant, turned toward him. "How dare you!" His hand was raised, index finger pointing. "How dare you speak that way to my wife!"

Peter Wyoming said, "Wife? You mean your ho'?"

His followers laughed. They laughed and cheered and shook their picket signs.

Carl's owlish glasses were askew on his face. "Bastards! You call yourselves Christians? Shame on you!"

Wyoming blinked with lizard quickness. His eyes were pale blue, and looking at Nikki. "The Lord says, 'Your shame will be seen. I have seen your abominations, your adulteries and neighings, your lewd harlotries!'"

Carl's muscles bunched beneath his pinstripes. Nikki said, "Don't," but he stepped toward Wyoming. She glanced at me. "Evan—"

We grabbed his arms. He was two feet from Wyoming, cocking his elbow to throw a punch I knew I couldn't stop. Until I heard Nikki's voice, close to his ear, speaking coolly and loud enough for Wyoming to hear.

"He's an inbred, low-wattage, mouth-breathing redneck. He's not worth it."

The impertinent dignity of her outrage held him back. His arm dropped and he turned to her. So he didn't see the smirk on Wyoming's face, the disdain that meant: no real man lets two women restrain him.

Wyoming said loudly, "You think Claudine was great, always promoting 'compassion' and 'cure' and 'education'. Those are just fancy excuses for whoring."

Ahead, the pallbearers slid the casket into the gaping embrace of the hearse. Nikki watched, her fingers clenched. I nudged Carl forward,

tipping my head toward the reporters and saying, “All they’d notice is that you threw the first punch.”

““Be wretched and mourn and weep,” Wyoming intoned. ““Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.””

The words struck and bruised: scripture as covering fire. Forget it. I was done holding back. “I just figured out your problem. You confuse humility with humiliation.”

Crew-cut said, “Big words don’t trick us! You’ll burn in hell!”

Nikki was biting her lip, walking at a heavy, pregnant pace, fighting not to cry in front of these people. Carl held his arm tight around her.

“Slut!” Crew-cut shouted, as afterthought, or maybe just punctuation.

I turned to face him. “Why is it that people with tiny brains always come out with that same, tired insult? Can’t your skulls fit in even a slender second thought?”

His acne inflamed. Before he could answer, I spun around. Carl was holding the door of their car for Nikki, waiting for her to lumber in before slamming it. As he walked around to the driver’s side, I saw the look on her face. It was brittle, and rupturing.

She was staring at the windshield, where a flyer had been stuck under the wipers. I hurriedly pulled it out. In lurid red print it said, *YOUR NEXT*. Beneath the words was a comic strip, titled “AIDS: God’s Roach Ho-tel.” The cartoons showed Hollywood street tarts scratching at open sores, with the tag-line, “Ho’s check in – but they don’t check out!” The drawings were gruesome and irritatingly professional. At the bottom of the page was a cheery note from The Remnant: “Visit us on the World Wide Web!”

Carl started his engine with a roar. Other mourners were yanking the flyers off their windshields, shaking their heads, crumpling them. Behind me, reporters were calling to Wyoming, clamoring for his attention. The hearse pulled away and Carl followed, heading up a somber procession, accompanying Claudine on her last journey.

Wyoming’s dry, deep voice rose above the background noise. He was speaking to a television reporter, leaning into the microphone, sounding aggrieved. To let him have the last word here seemed intolerable. I began walking toward him.

I heard him say he didn’t hate sick people – God did, and The Remnant was just stating that fact. The reporter leaned forward assertively, cocking his head to demonstrate attentive skepticism, asking Wyoming if he thought he had converted the people who attended the funeral.

“No, and I don’t care one bit. ‘Let the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right.’”

“Excuse me,” I said.

Wyoming, his followers, and the reporter looked at me. I said, ““Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”” It was the

first Bible quote I could think of, Gospel of Matthew, and fortunately it was apt.

Wyoming looked amused. His expression said come on, swap chapter and verse with me, you'll end up as my chew toy. The reporter pushed his sunglasses up his nose and twitched his mustache, not sure whether this interruption would make good airplay.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy’,” I said. “I just wanted you to remember that, Mr. Wyoming.”

He surveyed me with a stare that started at my feet, rode up my legs, and seemed to slide under my skirt and blouse. He appeared unimpressed by what folks call my tomboy figure – the sprinter's legs, spartan chest, short mussy hair the color of toffee. Still, by the time his eyes reached my face, I felt flushed.

The reporter said, “You seem upset about Pastor Wyoming's presence, Miss – ”

“Delaney. Evan Delaney.”

The cameraman swiveled to spot me in the lens of his minicam, but Wyoming jumped in. “Miss Delaney thinks I'm cruel, but Claudine Girard sent people to hell. Giving her a Christian funeral like a clean, decent woman is obscene.”

The reporter turned to me. “How do you feel about that?”

I gestured at Wyoming and his people. “I think we're looking at the dictionary definition of ‘obscene’, right here.”

“Will you listen to that?” Wyoming said. “She up and claims she's an expert on obscenity. Like that's something to be proud of.”

They each had a script: *Snappy Fundamentalist Sound Bites and Lights, Camera, Emotion!* I was irrelevant. Warily I held up the flyer and said, “Tell your cartoonist that ‘Millennium’ is spelled with two N's.”

Sometimes I am too clever for my own good. The hipshot quip can ricochet. As I walked away, Wyoming said, “Delaney, you said your name was? Tell the cartoonist yourself. You're related to her.”

I couldn't help it – I stopped dead and stared at the flyer. The grim and flashy cartoons suddenly looked familiar. It was the style, a cross between Spiderman and Xena, Warrior Princess. I flipped to the back page, the final drawing, where she would sign it.

Damn. In tiny letters, *Tabitha Delaney*. My brother's wife.

Blessed are the meek, for they keep their mouths shut in front of a TV crew.