

CHRIS WELL

Deliver Us from Evelyn

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Sunday night. April 23.

On his last day of this life, the Right Fair Reverend Missionary Bob Mullins checked the party dip. Just stuck his finger right in there, pulled some glop free, stuck it in his mouth, and sucked.

Hmm, good dip.

He wiped his saliva'd finger on his jacket, popped the top on a can of Pringles, shuffled a neat row of curved chips onto a Dixie paper platter.

There.

Setting the can down, he stepped back from the secondhand coffee table in the middle of the shag-carpeted office, looked at what his party planning skills had wrought. And he saw that it was good.

He went to the stereo system across the room, selected a CD. Personally, he would have preferred something by the Rolling Stones, maybe *Exile on Main Street* or *Beggars Banquet*—muscular, honky-tonk rock 'n' roll you can get drunk or stoned to, depending on your mood. He could really go for the bluesy wail of “Tumbling Dice” right now.

But the music library here offered none of that. Besides, his marks—that is, the members of his “flock”—held certain expectations regarding what music was appropriate for a prayer meeting. Especially in a small armpit of a town like Belt Falls, Illinois.

(Who names a town “Belt Falls” anyway?)

The ladies would be here soon. Then Missionary Bob would use his people skills, honed from his years of “ministry,” to good effect.

Would lead the group in a spontaneous (but carefully planned) evening following “the Lord’s leading”—some Bible, some hymns, some ministry time. A carefully rehearsed prayer, a combination of wails and pleas, which experience had shown to be a very effective prelude to the passing of the offering plate.

Swept up by the rush of maudlin and spiritual emotion, the ladies would cough up plenty.

“Yea, but there are those who do not have it as comfortably as we do,” he found himself practicing, fiddling with chair placement in the circle, maneuvering pillows on the couch. “Poor children who do not have the food or clothing or shelter such as we take for granted.”

He double-checked the handy photos on the table. The orphanage in Mexico went by a lot of names. It would not do for the Right Fair Reverend Missionary Bob Mullins to get all weepy-eyed over JESÚS AMA LOS NIÑOS PEQUEÑOS and then whip out a photo showing a bunch of tiny brown faces smiling under a banner that said CHILDREN OF HER MERCY ORPHANAGE.

Following the fiasco in the last town, he’d played it cool once he got to Belt Falls. (Really, who brings a wagon train across the frontier, breaks ground on a settlement, and says, “From henceforth, this shall be known as ‘Belt Falls’”?)

Ever since Andrea—his partner, his companion, his ray of light—had got Jesus, she’d stopped helping with the scams. Stopped helping him fleece the flock, so to speak. She laid it on thick enough—*It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment*, and all that.

He tried to smirk it off, tried the face that always brought her around, but it didn’t seem to work anymore. Whatever had got hold of her wasn’t letting go.

Missionary Bob would never admit it to anyone, least of all himself, that the dividing line between success and failure began and ended with Andrea. When she was working with him, the scams worked like butter.

But then she got religion, and the whole machine went up in flames.

Not that Missionary Bob got the clue. He kept working his games,

town to town, each new gambit failing, each new town harder to crack than the last.

Once he set up shop here in Belt Falls (don't get him started again about the name of the town), he took his time getting to know the people. Found them to be a small, close-knit community, smugly going to their church services.

Smug, but not that pious—it did not take much effort to plant sufficient evidence that the only pastor in town was a raving drug user, maybe even a dealer. Not enough evidence to get the man convicted—even the hick sheriff saw it was a weak case—but the hapless pastor had to make only one phone call to the wrong deacon asking for bail money before word of his *unholy lifestyle* rushed through the congregation like wildfire.

In the eyes of God and the law, he was probably an okay guy. But once a congregation chooses to believe the worst, a preacher may as well pack his bags and move on.

Missionary Bob had even heard tell of one particular church, somewhere in the Midwest, where the members had booted the pastor because he'd had the temerity to wear *short pants* to a *church potluck*.

Yep, hell—if it existed—would be packed to the lips with smug, busybody churchgoers who ran their preacher out of town because he had worn shorts to a church potluck. Or, as in this case, had been the victim of circumstantial evidence planted on him by a traveling huckster.

He stood and straightened his dress jacket. Felt a bulge in his left pocket, was surprised to discover a coaster with the face of Jesus on it.

He looked around the office, befuddled. When had he picked this up?

You don't have to lift anything here, he reminded himself. *You've pretty much lifted the whole office already.*

Missionary Bob, in what used to be the hapless pastor's office, heard steps echoing from the foyer, somebody clomping up the stairs. *My, my*, thought the Right Fair Reverend Missionary Bob Mullins, *these ladies do need to lose some weight, don't they?* Whoever this was, she was pounding the stairs to wake the devil.

He stopped fidgeting with pillows and stood up straight, getting into

character. Thinking of his plan, his mission, remembering the correct accent and speech patterns of a Right Fair Reverend Missionary, an accent as specific and undeniable as the drawl of New Orleans or the wicked blue-blood of Boston.

There was an insistent pounding on the door, a battering, really, if he had stopped to think about it. But he was too wrapped up in the character of a Right Fair Reverend Missionary. He slapped on a toothy grin and opened the door. “Welcome, child, to—”

It was a man. A. Large. Man. A grizzly bear towering over him, bloated flannel shirt cascading out of pants where they were almost tucked, tractor cap on his head declaring EAT ROADKILL. The grizzly bear pressed his flannelled beer belly against the Right Fair Reverend Missionary, leaned down from on high, and belched, “I’m Darla Mae’s husband.”

The Right Fair Reverend Missionary Bob Mullins broke character and cursed.

The rest of the confrontation was like a dream, a nightmare of slow motion, the bear smacking him, a freight train to the skull, tossing Missionary Bob across the room. Hitting the coffee table as he went down, elbow in the dip. The grizzly roaring, storming in, Missionary Bob on the floor, scrambling backward, away, fleeing in the only direction he could, farther into the room. The angry husband kicking the table over, party snacks flying, dip spattering across the bookcase.

As Missionary Bob kicked to his feet, always moving backward until the wall stopped his escape, one question kept flashing through his mind: *Is this about the fake antique Cross of James, or is this about the adultery?*

Either way, his back against the wall, this grizzly man bearing down on him, Missionary Bob was out of options. The giant man, his eyes red, had barrel fists clenched and ready to swing like sledgehammers.

There was a noise behind the grizzly, at the open door. “Missionary Bob?”

One of the ladies.

The enraged husband turned at the voice. Missionary Bob took his one and only chance, grabbed the stone head of Molière, clubbed

the grizzly across the side of the head. The man stumbled backward and fell.

Missionary Bob, fueled by anger and fear and blind, stupid adrenaline, kept clubbing, again and again. The man on the floor now, blood streaming from his head. Missionary Bob clubbing him with the bust again and again. On his knees, on top of the man, clubbing him again and again and again.

Finally, adrenaline loosening its grip, Missionary Bob became aware the man was not moving. Clutching air in hot, painful gasps, he dropped the bust to the carpet. Felt something wet on the side of his face, wiped it with his sleeve, saw blood smeared on fabric. Not his own blood.

Gasping, wheezing, he looked up and saw the witnesses, ladies pooling in the doorway, staring agape at the Goliath on the floor, downed by the David with his stone.