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Shadow Plots

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A Lizabet McNearney Mystery

Shadow Plots

David F. DeHart

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First Edition.

*"In to the shade of Madness
Comes a willing Priest
Falling into Shadow Plot."*

Chapter One

Portland, Oregon
4:00 P.M, Saturday, October 31, 1936

The afternoon sun glazed the tops of the Coast Range Mountains in the west, casting a coral glow over Portland. Patches of cerulean sky peaked behind darkening clouds creating a watercolor painting.

Lizabet McNearney whispered to herself, *"Red sky at night, sailors' delight."* However, what she was about to do was definitely not a delight.

She pulled the wrinkled telegram from her purse and held it up next to the light of the taxi's window. It was dated October 2, 1936, addressed to her apartment in Rome a month earlier, and read:

"Miss Lizabet McNearney. STOP. With sorrow we advise your brother, Fr. Patrick J. McNearney, OFM, passed October 1, burial tomorrow Mount St Mary's, Portland. STOP. "

Liz folded the telegram and held it to her forehead, as if to divine further information from its cryptic message. Pat was only thirty-six, four years younger than she, healthy and from a line of "long-livers," as her mother had often said. What was

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the cause of death? And, who sent the wire to her from the Portland Diocese? She sighed and leaned back in her seat pondering those questions.

The sky darkened with her mood. Tears once again streamed down her cheeks. The clouds opened and rain began pelting the soft-top of the Hudson taxi like a crazed drummer. Water soon sloshed across the windshield obscuring the road ahead. The wipers made lazy swipes across the glass, leaving behind a veiled smudge of oil and road dirt that had collected on the windshield. When the driver stepped on the gas pedal going up the steep road, the vacuum-operated wiper stopped; when he let up, it resumed its smearing action.

Liz edged forward on the rear seat, straining to see out into the rain-soaked countryside. "Welcome to Portland," she whispered to herself as the driver slowed to stop the taxi.

"Sorry, Miss, you say something?"

"Nothing. Is this the place?" She wiped the fog from the side window with her coat sleeve and squinted. She saw the entrance to the cemetery in the rock wall where massive wrought-iron gates stood open, like two black hands reaching out to pull her inside. She shuddered and tugged on her wide-brimmed fedora.

"Sign says, 'Mount Saint Mary's Cemetery.' That's what you wanted." The driver faced her, his big right arm stretched across the back of his seat.

She nodded. Although she dreaded the depressing prospect that lay ahead, the singsong nursery rhyme sound of "Mary's Cemetery" made her smile.

Beyond those gates on the tombstone-studded hillside were the recently interred remains of her younger brother.

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"Yes, this is it. Pull inside. Looks like the office is on the right." She aimed a black-gloved finger toward the building.

The thump of rain on the roof of the taxi lessened.

The cabbie slowly circled a fountain with a life-size bronze statue of the Virgin Mary atop a granite pedestal, just inside the entrance. He parked next to a dark, ivy-covered cottage where a light over the front door lit up a "CLOSED" sign. Liz checked the pendant watch pinned to her blouse. "It's only 3:00, you'd think the office would still be open."

"So, you still wanta get out?" the driver said, his eyes darting around for signs of life.

"Yes. As long as we're here." She removed a pack of Chesterfields from her handbag, tapped one into her hand, and lit it with her Dunhill lighter.

She started to open the door when the driver said, "You gotta umbrella?"

"Hell no, Oregonians never carry an umbrella."

He laughed. "You're right, Lady, but I'll get you one anyway." He got out and walked to the rear of the cab.

"Liz, *what are you thinking?*" She said aloud. "You didn't come all this way from Italy to sit in a frigging cab. Get going." She opened the rear door and uncoiled her tall frame from the Hudson, stretched to free the kinks in her back, much to the pleasure of the driver who eyed her statuesque figure.

He came forward and handed her a huge black umbrella with a bamboo handle. Taking it from him, she flicked her cigarette into a puddle and walked over to the office door. A sign read, "OPEN MON-THUR 9 TO 3." Below it she saw a typewritten note on a card, "Emergency - Call Capitol 8765 - Or ring for Sexton." An arrow pointed at a bell button on the doorframe.

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Damn! It's Saturday, she recalled. Emergency? Sure why not. Hadn't she just traveled several thousand miles from her apartment in Rome, and hadn't Patrick called her from his grave?

According to her inquiry at the Portland Archdiocese office he had been found dead on October first, and was buried in this Catholic cemetery on the third; nothing more than she had already learned from the wire. The young man she had spoken to had, "No further information," or was not about to divulge anything. Liz's twenty years experience in investigative reporting told her he had not been forthcoming. A long boat trip and an equally long boring train ride from New York had brought her home to Oregon as fast as modern transportation would allow.

"Ma'am, you want I should wait?" The cabbie stood, holding his coat over his head to shelter him from the now light rain.

"Yes, please." She reached over and pressed the doorbell button, and heard the sound of polite chimes coming from inside.

She closed the big umbrella, leaning on it like a cane. A face appeared in the window. When she leaned closer, eyes peering back at her widened and she was greeted with a toothless smile. Locks clicked and the door creaked opened inwardly.

"May I help you?" said a small, elderly man, bald-headed and rosy-cheeked. An odor of whiskey and tobacco emanated from his shabby clothing.

"Yes. Could you tell me where the priests are buried?"

"I surely can, Ma'am," he said examining her attire with interest.

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She wore the same clothes since arriving by train three hours ago— mid-calf-length black skirt, white ruffled blouse, and a lavender tweed waistcoat. And, her twin-fox Kolinsky, the mouth of one animal clenched onto the tail of the other. Her high-heeled shoes she had purchased in Milano last month did nothing to play down her six-foot-two slender figure. Her choice of *haut couture* would have been fine at a Parisian funeral, but here in this rain-drenched cemetery in Portland, Oregon, she might as well have been an alien.

The old man finally ended his inspection of her and looked up into her emerald eyes. “They’re up there,” he pointed to the hillside behind her. “At the foot of the cross.”

She spun around and followed his aim up the hill, then began walking away when the sexton called after her, “Anyone in particular?”

She raised her hand, and without speaking, waved him off. The path that led up the slope to the base of the large crucifix was paved with bricks, saving her from sinking her heels into the soggy grass. When she reached the top of the path, the late afternoon sun broke through the clouds again and painted the scene with a golden glow. She stepped onto a flagstone terrace and found several levels of graves, all meticulously trimmed.

The face of Christ on the towering crucifix above appeared to be studying her. At its base, white marble seraphim, wings spread in a protective sweep, safeguarded the Catholic priests who had gone to sit at the right hand of the Lord.

Liz began her search on the left, working her way up and across one level at a time. Her heels clicked loudly on the granite blocks. Horizontal white stone markers were aligned side-by-side in precise rows with gold crosses engraved above

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the names. After carefully examining each of them, she realized that the latest of the burials was a year ago.

"So. Where are you Patrick?" Liz spoke aloud. She stopped and looked down the row of priests' graves below her. None of them were recent interments. Re-checking each name carefully, making sure that she had not overlooked one, Liz realized that her dear Patrick was not here. She hung her head and began to cry, one of few truly heartfelt expressions of grief she had experienced since learning of his death. The long dreadful trip from Rome to this place was for nothing. Liz sat on a marble bench below the bronze crucifix and wept; exhausted from her long trip as well as from the mental turmoil she had endured during the past three weeks.

The rain started again and she opened the cabby's umbrella. After several minutes sitting with drops of rain thumping on the fabric, she took a deep breath and began walking back down the brick pathway.

The driver and the sexton were standing under the office awning, smoking.

"You find it, Ma'am?" the sexton asked.

"No. He's not there."

"What's his name?"

"McNearney. Father Patrick Joseph McNearney," she answered.

"Don't recall that name. When'd he die?"

"October first. He was pastor at Saint Catherine's."

The sexton's eyebrows shot upward and his mouth dropped open. "Oh, McNearney, you say?"

"Yes. You know the name?"

"I do. I'm sorry Ma'am; I sent you the wrong way. Was he a relative?" He stepped away from Liz.

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"My brother."

"Okay. Well, he's not going to be where I sent you, he's over in—"

"Over where? Why wouldn't he be up there?" Liz straightened, hands on her hips.

The sexton backed off a few feet. "Well, I'm quite sure he's over in the Shadow Plots."

"The where?" She fired back.

"Shadow Plots, Ma'am. On the other side of the wall, there," he said, pointing behind him, "Down the hill in that grove of pin oaks."

Liz spun around and followed the direction of his scrawny finger. A hundred yards to her right, down an unkempt hillside, she saw a low rock wall and a red-rusted gate.

"There?" she asked, astonished by the change in attitude of the sexton.

Standing next to the old man, the cabbie shuffled his feet. "Still want me to wait?" He tapped his watch and looked toward his taxi.

"Yes, Dammit! Wait!"

The sexton looked at her in amazement and the cabbie doffed his cap.

"Yes Ma'am, I'll wait right here."

A narrow muddy path led down toward the dark trees. She had to tiptoe to keep from sinking her heels into the soft clay.

At the bottom, she came to a rock-piled wall and an open gate. Stepping through the entrance, she entered a rough plot of ground, no more than 50 by 50, a neglected area with grass and weeds ankle deep. Under the canopy of the oaks, still laden with crusty brown leaves, she walked into darkness,

thick and dense as ink-black velvet. A dank musty odor of newly turned earth hung in the air.

Most of the burial plots were overgrown and the headstone inscriptions obscured. Her eyes, now accustomed to the dark, focused on the fresh soil, heaped in an oblong outline. Wilted rose petals were strewn about the yellow-ochre soil. Liz stepped slowly toward the plot. In the scant light that filtered through the oak trees, she spotted a simple black marble marker, with the inscription, "P.J. McNearney." Kneeling, she also saw that the stone did not bear the cross that she had seen on the priest's graves on the hill.

She dropped to her knees over the burial plot. Tears welled from her eyes and her heart swelled in unbearable pain.

"Why, Patrick? What in God's name have they done to you?" She stood, and wiped her tears away with her gloved hand.

From behind her, a low voice whispered, "Miss, can I help you?" She looked over her shoulder, saw the sexton standing at the gate, and nodded.

"Yes. Why is my brother in this horrible place?"

"The shadow plots are for those forsaken by the church." He swept his open palm toward the poorly maintained graves.

"Why on earth would they do that?" Her voice raised enough to cause the sexton to look sheepishly away from her.

"Can't bury someone in consecrated ground who dies with mortal sins on his soul," his voice apologetic. "You know, like suicide, for example." He pointed downward at Patrick's plot.

"My brother would never commit suicide!" she snapped.

"I'm terribly sorry, Ma'am, I wouldn't know much about that, only what I hear from the office. Don't tell anyone I said that."

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"What about these other graves," she said, aiming her finger at the weed-covered plots, "They can't all be suicides, can they?"

"No. I don't expect they are. A few may be murderers and such. Catholics that fell from grace, I'd say." His mouthed drooped and his blank eyes stared at the ground, avoiding eye contact.

She brushed the dead leaves from her knees and straightened her skirt. It was then she noticed a single wilted white carnation with a note attached to the stem. The flower must have been placed recently, the burial almost a month past. She leaned down to retrieve it and examined the small card held in place with a rusty pin.

"See you in Hell! Silly Mee."

*"Into Madness comes
A Child bereft of Love
Bred for Evil deeds."*

Chapter Two

*Woodburn, Oregon
Saturday night, October 31, 1936*

Sylvia grasped the brass handle firmly and tugged, easily opening the church's heavy door, but just a crack to peer into the darkness. Stepping back abruptly, she was about to let the door close and leave, when "The Voice" commanded, "Go in!"

She stepped inside and shivered, closing her eyes and willing the voice in her mind to stay outside. She wanted the freedom to face her fears alone, not to be forced to listen to the horrible things it screamed in her mind. Over the past few years, they had become increasingly louder and more demanding.

She had learned that she could make it fade away if she concentrated and visualized it slowly retreating. In her teenage years, there were several voices; sometimes talking to each another, and she would sit on the sidelines watching and listening. There were times when they joined in their chorus of demands. For a strange reason, when she turned twenty-one, three years ago, only one voice took control.

With fingers crossed and her head reeling, she stepped into the vestibule. A rack of votive candles just inside, illuminated

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the entry. The strong aroma of melted beeswax candles and incense was heavy, a scent that she associated with fear. The nuns at the orphanage the kids called "Saint Agony," believed that children had no place inside the church. Even though she was always extremely careful not to talk, wiggle or do anything whatsoever to invite a stinging slap from the sisters, she knew it would come anyway. By the time she was six years old, she had already determined that the priests and nuns were generally mean and looked for any opportunity to show how cruel they could be.

Now, even though she had just passed her twenty-fourth birthday, she still felt her cheeks become hot and she could smell the garlicky breath of Father Schultzen, as if he were standing behind her. Everything in the church contributed to her fear, the smoky candles, the dark wood pews, and the horrible suffering depicted by the saints in gory paintings and sculptures.

When she was eight or nine she had read a book called "The Good Shepherd." The illustrations in that book made her feel warm and comforted; drawings of a loving Savior with his arms around children, sweet lambs at his feet, and the Lord's beautiful pale eyes filled with love.

Once she had closed the book, reality smacked her in the face, darkness, everywhere, nothing but dingily clothed children and vile-tempered staff. Sadness and loneliness were her childhood companions, not Dick, Jane and their dog Spot; and certainly not a loving Shepherd. To this day, she still could not kneel at the foot of the altar and look up at the crucifix. The man who hung from the cross, bloodied and forsaken, did not instill comfort, but rather reinforced her belief that the church was a brutal place.

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Strangely, the only aspect of church she ever enjoyed was the confessional. The small dark room with its heavy drape was like a protective cocoon. When the priest slid back the screened window between them, she entered a different world. He would bless her, and she would recite the Act of Contrition, "Oh my God, I am heartily sorry ...". She really believed that God was on the other side of that screen and that she could talk to him without The Voice butting in. As a child the only sins she could think of were trivial things for which she would have already been punished. When she ran away from Saint Agony at age 14, it was not long before the sins grew to monstrous proportions, awful things for which she was sure God would never forgive. The terrible things she was forced to do at the orphanage were not her fault; however, the sins committed in the past years of living on the streets were an entirely different matter. Survival demanded a horrible price.

She took a deep breath and walked over to the holy water font, and was about to dip her fingers to bless herself, when The Voice spoke again.

"Stupid child. Don't you remember? That water is a devil's broth. It'll rot off your fingers. Wake up, idiot!" The sound of The Voice seemed to echo throughout the church.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "Don't be angry."

"I'll be angry anytime I want. You know what you must do, just stop messing around and get on with it. Now!"

She pulled her coat about her, covering her thin cotton dress, and cinched the belt tightly. She removed a hanky from her purse to cover her hair, and walked slowly down the center aisle. The church was empty, as she had hoped; knowing that at this hour, toward the end of confession, there would not be many parishioners present, only she and the priest.

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The confessionals were to the left of the aisle beneath tall stained-glass windows. She walked sideways through a row of pews and knelt on a predieu in a side chapel dedicated to the Holy Family.

The kids at Saint Agony referred to their guardians as the "Unholy Family." There was no Jesus, Mary or Joseph in their midst, just a crush of noisy, hungry kids, trying their best to remain inconspicuous to avoid punishment. And of course, the always-present black habits, moving about like penguins on a mission from God. The only "fathers" they had, were Father Schultzen and Father Crenshiem, two unfatherly men. There *were* nice priests and even an occasional sweet nun who actually expressed interest in the children's welfare; but unfortunately their tenure was short at Saint Agatha's Home for Orphans.

Although she was not technically an orphan; she *did* have a father and mother somewhere; but she hadn't seen them for seven years. She had no memory of her arrival in that place. She had been told that she had entered the orphanage when she was three-years old. The circumstances of her abandonment were never explained. The Voice told her she was garbage and like all garbage, her parents had simply dumped her in Saint Agony's trash bin.

Whenever a child ran away, the other children were herded into the chapel where they had to endure lectures about the dangers and evils that lurked in the streets outside the institutional walls. When she had mustered the courage to run away, she discovered that the streets were much safer than inside the confines of Saint Agony.

Kneeling at the small side altar, she heard someone speaking. Fearing The Voice had returned she began to recite

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Hail Mary's in hopes of willing it away. When a second voice joined the first, she realized that they came from the confessional next to her. She could hear only snippets of the conversation—a woman's husky voice muttering softly, and occasional sobs, followed by a man's soothing voice, "Now, now there." From what she could make out, the priest was comforting the woman, while she continued her confession. After a few more minutes, the woman left the confessional and walked to the front of the church, kneeling at the altar rail to recite her penance.

With the booth now empty, Sylvia made the sign of the cross, rose from the predieu and entered the confessional. As soon as she knelt on the padded step facing the window, the privacy panel slid to the side and she was looking through the screen at the shadowy figure of a young handsome priest. The dim light on his side of the window prevented him from seeing into the space where the penitent kneeled.

"Bless me Father for I have sinned," she began. "It's been one week since my last confession." She then sat silently waiting for the priest to respond.

He cleared his throat. "Yes, my child and what sins have you committed?"

Cotton balls seem to fill her throat and mouth, a dryness that stifled her ability to speak.

"I, uh, I have committed mortal sins, Father, many times," she said.

The priest waited for her to continue. The Voice was attempting to coach her, but she managed to will it away.

"I did sexual things, father, awful things."

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The priest shifted his body and leaned closer to the screen. "You do not have to be precise, but did they involve your husband?"

"No, father, I'm not married."

He cleared his throat again. "Well, did they involve adultery?"

"I told you, I am not married." She snapped.

The priest leaned away from the screen. She could hear him breathe heavily.

"Maybe, if I could talk to you in private," she said. "I think it would be easier to talk to you than to the doctors."

"Doctors? You mean psychiatrists? If so, I must advise you that Catholics do not consult—"

"No father. I would never go to such a person. I would rather talk to you, but not here, not now."

He leaned toward the window again. "Do you have other sins to confess?"

"No father."

"For your penance, you will recite the rosary twice in the side-chapel of the Blessed Virgin. Now say your Act of Contrition." He raised his hand to bless her. "*Absolvo te*" he began the prayer of absolution, and when he finished, he whispered, "Please meet me in the office behind the sacristy." He rose and left the confessional, and she waited until the sound of his footsteps faded, before exiting.

When she reached the side-chapel with the blue and white statue of the Virgin Mary, she knelt at the railing, took her small pink-beaded rosary from her coat pocket and began to say her penance.

Twenty minutes later she entered the small office at the front of the church to find the young priest sitting on a straight

back chair, tapping his fingers on the breviary in his lap. He jumped up when she opened the door and he pointed to the small horsehair couch opposite his chair.

He looked exactly like he did in the newspaper—a photo of him taken with a group of children, all wearing big smiles. The article had commended his parish for establishing a center for the children of working mothers. He was a handsome man, not much younger than she.

“Please sit over there,” he said, wagging his finger at the faded sofa.

Sylvia took a seat, her legs slightly apart and her faded housedress pulled taut across her breasts. The priest surveyed her and his mouth slackened. The sight of her sensuous young body made his breathing come in gulps, despite his trying to ignore the temptation.

The priest listened to the story of her life, his eyes widening at the degree of abuse she had endured in her childhood. He tried to apologize, but *he* was not the one who committed those terrible things. Why should he express regret, she wondered?

After about fifteen minutes into her story, she saw that the desired effect was taking hold; he had difficulty avoiding the warmth that emanated from her body. His cheeks flushed and sweat beaded on his forehead. She leaned forward, placing her hands on the priest's knees, squeezing gently. He twitched, making a vague attempt to move away. Her hands continued to caress his knees. She pulled her hands away making him smile weakly; then her right hand raised the hem of his cassock and crept upward toward his crotch. The Voice began to whisper again, coaching the seduction scene that soon developed.

In 1936, Sylvia, a disturbed woman living in Portland's shantytown, desperately searches for her fantasy mother. Lizabet McNearney, a veteran journalist, returns home to Portland from Rome to investigate the suicide of her brother, a Catholic priest. Liz is forced to relive her childhood bereft of love, filled with horror and shame. Liz's investigation crosses paths with Sylvia and both are drawn into the world of a diabolic killer known only as "The Death."

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