



E.B. Sullivan § 2

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3 § Tainted Cross

Tainted Cross

E.B. Sullivan

E.B. Sullivan § 4

Chapter One

Walt's Reputation

At first, local residents didn't pay much attention to Walt Logan's death. Not many people in our quiet community had direct dealings with him and the few who had thought him strange. Although he was a hermit, being his closest neighbor I witnessed a special side of him.

Throughout my childhood, classmates whispered about his place being spookier than a quintessential haunted mansion. They often dared each other to spy on Walt, but to my knowledge, no one except me was brave enough to venture onto his grounds.

His property consisted of two hundred rolling acres, a small cottage, a freestanding garage, and a huge workshop. While warning me not to trespass on his land, my parents forbade me to spread gossip about him. My mother would say, "He, like everyone else, is one of God's children. Therefore, he deserves respect."

My involvement in Walt's case began at six thirty five a.m. when Eric O'Brien burst into the sheriff's office. I'd worked the night shift covering the front desk. A recent college graduate having majored in psychology with a focus on criminology, like a teenager, I was once again a student living with my mom and dad. My goal was to complete online classes to earn a master's degree.

My uncle, the local sheriff, offered me a non-paying forensic internship at his office. Without many crimes to investigate, I did odd jobs at the station. Thus far, while a few assignments were generally interesting, most were boring. Filing papers or sitting at the front desk during off hours fit into the latter category.

5 § Tainted Cross

Eric demanded, "I need to see the sheriff, right now."

"He's not in yet. Probably having another cup of coffee at Lyn's Café. Maybe I can be of assistance?" "No.

No. It's an emergency." He turned to walk away when Sheriff Scott Brady, my uncle, waltzed in. "Morning Regina. Nice to see you, Eric. What can I do you for?" He removed his hat and jacket and hung them on a coatrack.

Right there in the waiting room, Eric blurted, "On my way to work, driving on Buckeye Road, I almost ran over a mutilated body."

As if building up steam, he gulped mouthfuls of air. His words rushed together. "On the straightaway with my bright lights glaring I saw something or someone sprawled out in the distance. Wanting to miss the thing, "I swerved then stopped.

"With my truck in park, I lowered my window, held out a flashlight and gasped. Blood trickled down a man's bearded face. 'Are you all right?' I asked until I viewed his torn apart stomach. At the sight of what the wild animals had left of it I felt sick."

As if to shake off the image, he shook his head a few times.

"At the sound of a shrill scream, fearing someone else was under attack I threw the torch on the passenger seat and rolled up the window. Heeding the warning to drive away before the murderer made me his next victim, I got out of there in a hurry."

I thought a barn owl probably made the screeching cry, because, logically, if the victim was murdered it was doubtful his killer would be lingering in the woods.

"Did you recognize the man?" the sheriff asked. "No, but since it was near the turn off to Logan's place it could've been the old timer. Never really saw him up close, but remember him having a beard."

E.B. Sullivan § 6

While the two men were talking, my relief, Deputy Jason Wilson, showed up.

"Morning," I said.

"Morning to you. Anything happening?"

Sheriff Brady shook Eric's hand. "Thanks for coming in. Deputy Wilson will record your statement. I'll send the coroner out. Regina and I'll meet him and secure the scene." He put on his hat and jacket.

With a myriad of emotions, I grabbed my parka and

followed him out to the squad car.

He indicated that I should drive.

Once inside the car, he turned on the siren. “Step on it,” he ordered.

As I hurried out of town, he called the medical examiner, Dr. Jon Volpe.

The crowded streets quickly faded from my rearview mirror. An occasional house peeked through tall trees bordering both sides of the highway. When I turned down a side road, I hoped Eric had guessed wrong about the victim being Walt Logan: a great neighbor, a true friend, and one of the kindest men I’d ever met.

7 § Tainted Cross

Chapter Two

Walt’s Body

Through glinting rays, a vulture’s silhouette swooped toward the windshield, startling me.

Each day since I began working at the sheriff’s office I hoped to have the opportunity to visit a crime scene.

Was I like this scavenger capitalizing on someone’s misfortune?

As I approached the desecration, two other vultures were pecking at the human remains. To get the birds away from the victim, I beeped the horn.

In an instant, the threesome flew away.

A part of me wished I too could fly far from here and distance myself from death.

The sheriff stepped out of the vehicle.

Following his lead, I took deep breaths of chilly air. The biting cold pinched my lungs triggering uncontrollable shivers. In an attempt to stop from trembling, my arms crossed and wrapped around my sides.

While he knelt next to the corpse, careful not to contaminate the area, I stood back asking God for the strength to accept His will even if it meant I’d lost my dearest friend.

“Always choosing to be alone, he died with nature.”

The sheriff's tender voice preparing me for what I dreaded to see reminded me he was my protective uncle.

Needing confirmation of Walt's death, I forced myself to look at his face.

If it weren't for blood splatters on his cheeks and beard, I would've thought he was taking a peaceful nap. His fingers in a steeple praying position were over his heart.

E.B. Sullivan § 8

I lowered my eyes for a second and glimpsed his exposed insides spilling out of his midsection. I quickly diverted my gaze to his boots, but not quick enough to avoid the horrific image, like indelible ink permanently recorded in my mind.

The sheriff turned to me.

Trying to maintain professionalism, I choked back my tears.

Noticeably sniffing he embraced me. "It's okay to cry. I do it every time. The day I don't feel for victims is the day I'll need to quit this job, 'cause it'll be the day I'll lack sufficient humanity to help anyone."

I let my sorrow pour out onto his thick jacket. When I heard the sound of vehicles approaching, I pulled away, tried to hide my grief and appear calm. A black car and an ambulance parked behind our squad car. A man wearing blue jeans and a gray jacket stepped out of the car and approached.

The sheriff introduced me. "Regina, Dr. Jon Volpe."

We briefly shook hands. Since I'd been away at college for the last four years this was my first opportunity to meet him. I wondered why Jon, young, intelligent, and from a big city, would want to be medical examiner of our rural county.

Two paramedics exited the ambulance. Having known Sue and Evan since childhood, we simply exchanged hellos, but the reason for their presence caused a threat of tears to expose my internal distress.

Fortunately, the sheriff reminded me I had a job to do. "While Jon and his team conduct a preliminary examination, you can help me photograph the immediate area."

Thankful to be busy, although the road seemed undisturbed, I kept snapping photos as I walked in an ever widening circle around Walt.

9 § Tainted Cross

Jon announced, “No visible gunshot or knife wounds. The blood on the deceased’s face could be the result of cuts and scratches from ragged branches and tree limbs. I’ll know more after an autopsy.”

Hearing his words reinforced the reality of the situation. Anger, like sparks from hot coals, flared up within me leaving a charred empty hole in heart.

Inside my head I screamed, *Why did Walt have to die?*

The sheriff released Walt’s body to the coroner. He in turn had the paramedics place Walt into a body bag. As they lifted him onto a stretcher, I noticed Jon had chalked a yellow outline of Walt’s form on the asphalt.

With Walt in the back of the ambulance, Sue and Evan drove away to the morgue.

Trying to refocus, I concentrated on my forensic duties and photographed the rendering from various angles.

E.B. Sullivan § 10

Chapter Three

Walt’s Workshop

Still early morning, the sun hadn’t burnt off a fogbank hanging between the treetops. Under the shrouded canopy, along with the sheriff and Jon, donning nitrile gloves I slowly combed the adjacent woods.

In the dismal grayness, we moved at a snail’s pace. Perplexed, I said more to myself than anyone, “Finding Walt on the road doesn’t make sense.”

“You knew the victim?” Jon asked.

Choking back tears, I managed to mutter, “Uh-huh.” My uncle suggested, “Tell Jon about your special relationship with Walt.”

Fond memories filled my mind. “When I was barely

eleven, I started peering into his workshop's windows. I watched him fashion an array of pretty objects. In particular, he whittled familiar looking angels, Santa Clauses, animals, and wooden train cars."

The thought of the whimsical figures made me smile. "Each Christmas for as long as I could remember, our priest had given the children of his parish similar carvings and told us, 'Someone, who'd rather remain anonymous, donated these.'

"Realizing Walt Logan was the creator of our gifts I chose to respect his privacy. I didn't tell any of the kids about what I'd seen.

"One day, standing on stacked crates, I leaned forward to get a better look. A crate slipped and with a loud crash, I tumbled to the ground. Scrambling to get on my feet, I knocked over the other crates making another racket.

"I spun round, ran, and bumped into the scary man.

"He held my two arms.

11 § Tainted Cross

"Terrified I peered at his unshaven face. His piercing dark eyes seemed to look right through me. "He asked, 'Want a cup of water?'

"Frightened he'd hurt me, maybe even eat me, I tried to squirm free, but his deep voice stopped me. 'Thanks for being a good friend.'

"I didn't know what he meant.

"As if to clarify he said, 'Thanks for keeping my secret about the toys.'

"From then on, we were pals."

My attention switched to a torn piece of fabric stuck on a branch. I pointed it out to the men.

Jon said, "Looks like the same pattern as Walt's woolen shirt."

I marked the tree, bagged the cloth and asked, "Don't you think it strange Walt was only wearing pajamas and a heavy shirt rather than winter clothes? And why would he choose to walk through this dense part of the woods rather than his gravel path to the road?"

"Maybe he liked to wander?"

"Not the Walt I knew. He preferred to stay close to

home.”

Jon said, “Maybe you didn’t know him that well.”

Irritated by his comment, I scoffed. “Sheriff can confirm my supposition matches reality.”

“She’s right. The guy was a real homebody. He made sacrifices to avoid people. I was a teenager when he first came to these parts. He grew vegetables and lived off the land. Drank well water and heated his place with logs he split from fallen trees on his property. He seldom went into town. Every now and then, he ventured to other cities selling his wares. Kids made up stories about him saying he’d roast anyone who dared to step foot on his spread.” He shook his head. “Guess most of us believed the rumors ‘cause if a dog went missing us kids blamed Walt for stealing it to make a fancy stew.

E.B. Sullivan § 12

“But Walt was far from an animal killer. Am I right, Regina?”

“Yes. In fact, he loved all of God’s creatures to the extent of choosing not to eat any of them.”

By then we’d reached Walt’s workshop, a huge log structure with a pitched metal roof.

A side door squeaked as it swung in the breeze. Sheriff Brady stepped over the threshold. A few minutes later, he motioned us to follow.

Walt’s five thousand square foot workshop didn’t look right. Several drawers were open. Rather than objects lined up in perfect order on the shelves many were askew. A few tools rested beside hunks of wood scattered on countertops.

It took me a few minutes, of scanning the piles of wood, to realize they were comprised of chopped up crosses. Easter crosses to be exact. “Why would anyone want to destroy Walt’s beautiful work?”

Jon answered, “Maybe Walt didn’t feel they were good enough? Or maybe he was angry, angry at God.”

I immediately jumped to Walt’s defense. “Not a chance. He was truly a reverent man.”

I walked to the far end of the space to Walt’s recessed chapel. From the Madonna and Child relief to the

elaborate detailed candlesticks painted in vivid colors, it resembled a centuries old Mexican church.

Preferring not to leave his property, I understood why he created a private place of worship. I thought of the many times I found Walt kneeling on his wooden kneeler deep in prayer.

I glanced at a carved Dove of Peace. Its wings gave the illusion they were fluttering.

The altar cloth seemed undisturbed, but I noticed an Easter cross was missing.

I told the men, "Walt kept a special cross, an Easter cross, in this empty spot."

13 § Tainted Cross

"What did it look like?"

"It had sculpted white lilies intertwined on mahogany wood. The one that was here was a copy. A few months ago, as a graduation gift, Walt gave me the first Easter cross, he'd ever made. I had admired it for years, but he always referred to it as a tainted cross. He pointed out flaws, scratches, and chipped paint, but the effects of time were what I liked about it. On several occasions he offered me one of his copies, which were popular sale pieces, but I said none could compare to the original."

I didn't tell them on that day Walt opened a small compartment in the back of the cross.

'See what's inside,' he instructed.

I pulled out shimmering pink rosary beads.

Walt's words touched my heart. 'I'll always think of you as the sweet girl who bravely peered into my workshop. Hope you like them?'

Jon's voice interrupted the poignant memory. "Do you still have the cross?"

"Of course. I'll never part with it."

To be positive the chopped up crosses were all Easter crosses, I walked back to the pile. Without touching them, I could see almost every piece had part of a vine of delicate white lilies.

"Someone was looking for a specific Easter cross." I shook my head. "Walt would hate to see this. He kept his workshop immaculate, free from wood shavings, all his tools cleaned and placed in designated places. He was

meticulous and extremely organized.”

My thoughts rambled to the times I sat watching Walt sanding, polishing, and painting wooden pieces. With the scent of sawdust permeating the room, the expansive space was always spotless.

I shifted my gaze to the potbelly stove in the center of the room. Its lack of heat reminded me of Walt’s

E.B. Sullivan § 14

absence. On a cold winter’s day like today, he’d have a fire blazing in it making the entire area toasty warm. I pondered aloud, “Wonder if whoever did this found what he or she was looking for?”

Jon said, “Or maybe Walt destroyed the crosses.”

What was wrong with him? Hadn’t he heard what we said about Walt?

My dear uncle, the sheriff, raised his eyebrows.

“Maybe so, but we’ll dust for prints in the disturbed areas.”

Thankful for his wisdom, I said, “Good idea.”

15 § Tainted Cross

Chapter Four

Walt’s Mystery

With the three of us dusting the doorframe, a few shelves, and the piles of destroyed crosses, we quickly completed the task.

As we walked to Walt’s house, I stared at the reflections of trees and his cozy cottage in the shimmering pond. Like them, my world seemed upside down.

We peeked into Walt’s garage. His tucked away older model truck looked as if it’d been there for quarter of a century. On the wall behind a long clean workbench, automotive tools were hanging on various sized hooks. On the opposite wall were shelves containing supplies.

Fifty yards farther, we stepped onto his porch. Still wearing nitrile gloves, the sheriff turned the front doorknob. As usual, Walt’s house was unlocked. The inviting living room was neat and clean. My gaze lingered on the furniture

Walt had made. Each piece was hand carved. He'd upholstered the chairs and couches in contrasting fabrics and stitched accent pillows. He used the remnants to make colorful panels to frame the windows.

My uncle said, "Walt was a true artist. He created most of what you see."

In the kitchen, a half filled glass of water rested on the small wooden table.

I conjectured, "It wouldn't be like him not to wash his glass. Someone must've caught Walt by surprise."

"If he had an unexpected visitor, since there aren't any signs of a struggle, I'd guess it was someone he knew." Jon said.

"Or Walt heard noises from his workshop and went outside."

E.B. Sullivan § 16

"It's too far from his outbuilding to his house to hear anything."

"Maybe he saw his workshop lit up."

The two men followed me. We peeked into the bathroom. Everything was in its place.

Jon poked around in the drawers and medicine cabinet.

Our next and last stop was Walt's bedroom. Seeing one corner of his bedspread and the underlying sheet folded back I said, "He must've gotten up during the night, went to the kitchen for a drink of water, and saw a light flicker in his workshop."

I got on my knees, lowered my head, and searched under his bed.

"What are you doing?" Jon asked.

"Looking for Walt's loaded shotgun."

Although he didn't say it, I guessed Jon was thinking, *So much for Walt's peaceful nature.* I didn't share my friend's wisdom with Jon. Walt had often told me he had a weapon as a means of prevention. He'd said, 'For most criminal types, no words are as convincing as the sight of a powerful gun.'

"It's gone." I announced and shared my imagined narrative. "After seeing the light in his workshop,

suspecting an intruder, Walt rushed in here, pulled out his gun. Armed he confronted the thief, who ran from the outbuilding into the forest. Walt pursued him through the moonlit woods to the road.”

“If you’re right, where’s his shotgun?” Jon asked, “We didn’t find it. And why was he wearing a woolen shirt and boots instead of just his pajamas and slippers?”

“My guess is when he awakened he grabbed the shirt, like a robe, to walk through the chilly house into the kitchen. Not wanting to drag dirt into his house, he always left a pair of wellies by the back door. Chasing the intruder

17 § Tainted Cross

would explain why he ran through the forest rather than taking the established path to the road.”

Jon commented, “So far, there’s no hard evidence to support your theory.”

In silence, we returned to our vehicles.

Losing Walt had undoubtedly put me in a foul mood. Maybe that was why I found Jon and his remarks annoying. Yet, watching him riding away didn’t give me even a smidgen of relief.

Sounding more like my dad than my uncle the sheriff said, “Maybe I’d better drive.”

Deferring to him, I sat in the passenger seat.

He turned to me. “Not sure if a robbery took place here, and at present there’s no evidence of murder. My gut tells me Walt died of natural causes and there’s probably a logical explanation for the chopped up crosses.”

As an intern, I knew better than to challenge my boss. In his many years as sheriff, he earned a reputation of solving cases, making arrests, and gathering enough facts to help get perpetrators convicted.

Grateful citizens showed their appreciation and respect by re-electing him term after term.

Since my father announced his plan to retire in the upcoming year, my uncle talked about turning in his badge. He wanted to while away days fishing with his brother. He realized he’d neglected his wife far too long and thought it about time they did things as a couple. My parents were good friends with my aunt and uncle and they often talked about traveling together when the two men had idle time.

The obvious way the sheriff was grooming Deputy Wilson for the elected position made me believe my uncle was serious about not running for office next time around.

Once he tuned out of Walt's driveway my uncle said, "Regina, let me take you home. You must be exhausted and are in no state to be on the road."

"I'd rather go back to the station and get my car."

E.B. Sullivan § 18

"As you wish."

We drove in silence until we reached the station's parking lot where I bid him goodbye and drove away.

19 § Tainted Cross

Chapter Five

Walt's Friendship

Instead of going home, thinking I owed it to Walt to investigate the circumstances of his death, I turned down a gravel road off the main one, pulled into his driveway, and as I'd done in the past, parked by the front entrance of his cottage.

Before getting out of the car, I studied his well maintained, simple structure. It wasn't fancy, but gave off a nostalgic ambiance.

In preadolescence, it was my secret hideaway where Walt read to me, sang to me, showed me how to use tools, and delighted me with his imaginative stories.

While going through a rebellious period in my teen years, it acted as a safe haven. When I disagreed with my mother, or thought my father was unreasonable, I ran to Walt's place. Numerous times, I paced his wraparound porch trying to sort out jumbled feelings. Often times, I sat on the top step, buried my head in my hands, and cried. Other times, I pushed open his front door, stood before him, and listed the many injustices my parents imposed.

Walt was good about giving me space. He waited for my initial rush of tears to subside before speaking. He was a great listener. He allowed me to rant about my folks'

condescending attitudes, their high expectations, and their long list of restrictions.

He had a way of seeing the best in the worst situations. He made me laugh and without preaching, he put my woes into perspective.

During college breaks, within hours of arriving home, I drove to his place and brought him up to date on my newfound adventures. If it weren't for his provocative questions, I wouldn't have chosen my current career path.

E.B. Sullivan § 20

At the threshold of his cottage, struck by cold reality, I froze.

Never again would I sit with Walt at his rustic kitchen table. Never again would he serve me iced-tea or hot chocolate. Never again would he listen to my silly problems. Never again would this incredibly intelligent, knowledgeable man generously share his wisdom.

Overcome with self-pity and a sense of loss, tears streamed down my cheeks. Sobbing, my chest heaved with sorrow. This beautiful man deserved so much more than he had. Yet, I selfishly never encouraged him to change his ways, explore the world, or leave his woods.

While he avoided most people, he welcomed me into his private universe. I'd grown accustomed to his eccentric ways. He sometimes worked nights and slept days. Other times, he took what he called power naps, five to ten minutes long, and worked for days on end. And, no matter how busy he was, he'd spend periods of each day in his chapel praying.

An eerie sensation replaced my grief. In addition to the impact of Walt's absence, his familiar house seemed to exude an unsettling aura. Regardless of what my uncle thought, beyond a doubt, I sensed a terrible crime had been committed against my dear friend.

Now it was my turn to do something for Walt. I vowed to solve his mysterious case, but realizing in my current state, fatigued and overcome with grief, I wasn't in any condition to accomplish much; I left Walt's property and drove to my parents' place.

Chapter Six

Walt's Employee

Turning down our driveway, I spotted my father's truck parked near his office.

Soon after starting to work for Walt, my dad converted the old log cabin into his workspace. Since I was just a baby at the time, I had no recollection of him working any place else. In my youth, he spent hours on the phone taking orders. With the advent of the internet, he did most sales online. At first, he spent a few days a month delivering merchandise. During the last decade, as Walt's customer base stretched across the country, my dad hired a reliable transit company to pick up inventory stored in a barn adjacent to the cabin and make deliveries.

I pulled in behind Dad's truck.

From the smoke billowing from the tiny chimney, I knew he intended to be there for a while.

No sooner did I enter his office he enveloped me into a tight hug and whispered, "Honey. Scott called. He told me about Walt."

Overcome with sadness, my body drooped.

Almost carrying me, he brought me to a bench Walt had carved.

We sat together crying.

Sometime later, I said, "I can't believe he's gone."

"More than you'll ever know, Walt did so much for me, for us as a family. If there's a Heaven I'm sure he's there."

I knew he was right. I couldn't think of a time Walt had lost his cool, was mean, or acted rudely. He was all about giving, giving a shoulder to cry on, an ear to listen to my silly woes, and arms to offer comforting hugs. He gave

E.B. Sullivan § 22

me advice, guidance, and most of all encouragement. He freely shared his wisdom, his spirituality, and his creativity. My dad inched back from me and with his outstretched

hands took mine. “There’s something you need to know.”

His serious tone made me nervous. I wondered if he knew some deep dark secret about Walt. Feeling uncomfortably warm, I wished my hands were free to take off my jacket.

His words shocked me. “I wasn’t always a good guy, decent husband, or responsible father. I was a stereotypical salesman traveling, flirting, drinking way too much.

“My foolishness caught up with me. One day I went from being number one in my office to the next day justifiably fired. In my arrogance, I blamed my boss.

“I thought I’d show him the mistake he made in letting me go by working for his biggest competitor. However, my negative reputation preceded me. It was impossible to find a lateral position in my field. Stubbornly I refused to take a lower paying one. To pay our bills, your mother worked full time and all the overtime hours she could get. She was pregnant with you, but I selfishly allowed her to exhaust herself.

“One day Walt came to see me. I’d gotten up late, was still in my robe, and was slurping coffee laced with whiskey. In his patient way, he helped me really see myself. I realized to be a real man I needed to take any job. To my surprise, he offered me a position selling and delivering his wares. He made me promise, until after his death, never to tell my child about the circumstances that led me to be his employee. Grateful to him, I agreed to his terms of secrecy.”

My dad took a deep breath and sighed. “In short, he’d invented a job for me, helped wean me off alcohol, and held my hand while training me to be a scrupulous

23 § Tainted Cross

representative of his products. Through his example, I realized what was important in life.”

He let go of one of my hands, wiped away his tears, and swallowed hard. “At first I drove his beat up pickup to make deliveries of his church art: crosses, altars, benches, candlesticks and other religious stuff. A few years later, Walt gave me money to buy a new truck and started introducing me to his customers. Later, he trusted me to

handle both sales and deliveries as long as I spent quality time with your mom and you.”

Between sobs he said, “Making sure your mother didn’t have to work Walt gave me a salary far above my worth. Ever since then, he’s generously given me raises with bonuses thrown in here and there.”

As if ashamed, he lowered his head.

I waited in silence.

He whispered. “Hope you don’t hate me for being a pathetic egotist.”

Despite his surprising revelations, appropriate words automatically came out of my mouth. “Of course not, Dad.”

His expression reflected doubt. “Really?”

Sincerely I said, “Knowing your past makes me feel closer to you.”

He changed the subject. “Scott tells me you suspect an intruder was either chasing Walt or Walt was chasing him.”

I nodded. “What do you think?”

“I agree with you. In all the years I’ve worked for him, I never saw him very angry, at least not enough to destroy his work. And, Walt wouldn’t have taken an indirect route to the main road unless he had a good reason. If he needed to see a doctor, he’d have called for help or driven off his land to get medical attention. For sure, something doesn’t add up.”

E.B. Sullivan § 24

“Until I find answers, Dad, officially or not, I’m going to keep searching for evidence.”

He ignored my comment.

With my head reeling, my heart broken, my mind flooded with information, I feared if I stayed with him a second longer I’d explode.

The sound of my mother’s car passing gave me a reason to leave.

I kissed his cheek. “I want to be the one to tell Mom about losing Walt.”

Chapter Seven

Walt's Admirer

When I stepped inside the house, my mother was nowhere in sight. I assumed she was in the greenhouse checking on her orchids. Not wanting to disturb her in her favorite place, I decided to wait until later to tell her the sad news.

Although I knew I needed to eat, not having the stomach to swallow as much as a cup of water I went into the bathroom instead. As if to wash away the reality of Walt's death, I stripped, stepped in the shower, and turned on the faucet. Under a downpour of steamy water, a hollow feeling permeated my being, dulled my senses, and kept a constant flow of tears streaking my face.

Wrapped in a towel I slipped into my room. I pulled on a pair of snug jeans, slipped a heavy sweater over my head, and flopped on my bed to put on a pair of warm socks.

To stifle my cries, I lowered my face into a pillow. Images of Walt's dead body swirled in my mind making me nauseous.

A knock on my door caused me to sit up and attempt to wipe my cheeks with the palms of my hands.

My mother called out, "Regina."

From her shaky voice, I realized she'd already heard about Walt's death. "Come in."

She curled up on my bed next to me.

I stared into her red swollen eyes.

"I have something to tell you," she said.

"I know, Mom. I went to Walt's house with Uncle Scott."

E.B. Sullivan § 26

Instead of acknowledging my statement, she blurted, "Months before you were born, your dad and I almost divorced."

I thought of my father saying he hadn't always been a good husband.

Her voice sounded strong. "It's time you knew the truth."

Not sure if I wanted to hear any sordid details about my parents' marriage, I nevertheless, listened. "We were married for many years before your birth. With us both working, we were able to save up enough money to buy property and have this house built. Over the years, consumed with individual interests, on too many levels we grew apart.

"Your dad was always on the road, but I wasn't lonely.

"I suspected he had lovers, and quite frankly, I didn't care if he did."

I gave her a quizzical look. Although they weren't overly affectionate, my parents always seemed to get along well.

She pulled out a few tissues from a box on my night table and attempted to mop up a flood of tears. "Walt, not your dad, was the love of my life."

Although her words shocked me, I couldn't deny the times I wished Walt were my father. "Is he my dad?"

Her head shook from side to side. "No he isn't. Of this, I'm one hundred percent certain. As much as I wanted him to be my lover and give me a child, he limited our affair to an emotional one. No matter how hard I tried to entice him, Walt, the perfect gentleman, never as much as kissed my lips. Yet, without doing anything to tarnish my honor, he made me feel extraordinary, made me feel loved."

"I know what you mean. He made me feel special, too."

27 § Tainted Cross

I tried to hug her but she pushed me back and said, "He worked hard to salvage my marriage and make it work. In subtle, indirect ways, he led me to comprehend the meaning of the pledge I'd made before God to love your dad in good times and bad. As Walt bestowed a divine awareness, my religious faith strengthened to the point of me passing beliefs and values to you."

I nodded and thought of his theological insights expanding my spiritual convictions further.

She continued, “He helped me realize that your dad and I were both responsible for our marital problems. He helped me mature. If it weren’t for Walt I would’ve left your dad, deprived you of an everyday father, and probably would now be a sour, bitter woman.

“My guess is Walt also worked his wizardry on your dad. Once he became Walt’s employee, your dad grew up. Walt’s job made it possible for your dad to spend time at home. To his credit, he used the extra hours wisely showing us his wonderful side and showering us with attention.

“Even after I rekindled my romance with your dad, I never stopped loving Walt.”

I remarked, “I can’t remember you ever visiting him or him coming here to see you.”

“Fearing my desire for Walt would show, or I’d compare the two men, out of respect for your father, I avoided Walt. In truth, I didn’t trust I had the strength to resist my strong attraction to him.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Regardless of the reasons, like an ungrateful thief I’d taken so much from Walt, but gave him nothing in return. Focusing on my new role as a mother and reestablishing a connection with your dad, I cut Walt out of my life. But despite abandoning him, unbeknown to him, I couldn’t remove him from my heart.”

She stoked my cheek. “You must think me shameful.”

E.B. Sullivan § 28

I reached up and clutched her hand. “Oh, Mom, I think you’re terrific and I completely understand why you adored Walt.”

She blushed. “I can now tell you I relished hearing your stories about Walt singing to you, debating with you, and offering you guidance. Through you, I vicariously kept him present in my life.”

Her intensified crying made it difficult for her to speak.

By now, I, too, was sobbing, but managed to ask,

“What will we do without our incredible friend?”

29 § Tainted Cross

Chapter Eight

Walt's Identity

When we heard my father entering the house, my mother dried her tears. “We ought to go to him,” she said.

Robotically, I followed her.

As if not wanting to startle him, she stealthily moved through the living room, inching her way toward him.

With his back toward us, he sat at the breakfast bar with his head buried in his propped up hands. No sooner had she stepped foot in the kitchen than he rose and turned in her direction.

I watched the grief stricken couple wrap their arms tightly around each other. Thinking it best for my parents to spend time alone, I grabbed my coat.

Without saying a word, I left the house unnoticed.

Ambling through the woods from my house to Walt's, I attempted to block out the fact he no longer would be home. An irrational part of me hoped he'd greet me. His welcoming smile, like magic, would dispel the nightmare of his death.

Clinging to fanciful thinking in the moment and trying to avoid the reality of the future, my mind wandered to the past. I thought of me racing into his house sobbing about trivial issues. Sympathetic, Walt never laughed at my plights, no matter how silly, from my parents' overprotective restrictions to a breakup with my latest boyfriend.

Sooner than I liked, his porch came into view. Its steps beckoned. I sat on the top one trying to convince myself that Walt wasn't gone. I imagined, like all my other visits, he'd join me on the weathered wooden surface and

E.B. Sullivan § 30

comfort me. He'd explain the strange events of the day including his miraculous resurrection.

Drawing me out of a make believe world, a ding from my cell phone brought me back to the heart

wrenching present.

I'd received a text from my uncle:

Called your house, spoke to your mom who told me you weren't there. Guess you're at Walt's place. Sit tight. Jon is on his way. He has important information to share with you.

Anxious minutes passed until Jon's black car pulled up.

With trepidation, I walked toward him.

"Hi," he said and indicated we sit together.

"Finished already?" I asked.

He shook his head from side to side. "As much as I hate to upset you I thought you'd like to know what I discovered as soon as possible."

"Yes, of course. Did you find evidence of a struggle?"

Again, he shook his head from side to side. "Before starting an autopsy, I routinely run a victim's fingerprints through our database."

When he hesitated, wondering why he was stalling I felt a frozen lump in my stomach. Dreadful thoughts like arrows shot from my mind to my heart piercing it with sharp pangs.

His light blue eyes stared into my brown pair as he handed me a thin folder. "The man you knew as Walt Logan is a former convicted felon. His real name is Lawrence Walter Boone. Fifty-six years ago, he began serving a twenty-year prison sentence. Ten years later, he was released due to good behavior."

In a state of disbelief, I slowly opened the folder. The faded black and white mug shots of a young man only slightly resembled Walt. When I read he'd been convicted

31 § Tainted Cross

of accessory to armed robbery and murder I shouted, "There must be a mistake. How can you be sure this is Walt?"

"His teeth impressions match Lawrence Walter Boone's dental records."

I was speechless.

Jon asked, "Are you okay?"

Trying not to acknowledge my feelings, I attempted to switch my focus from personal to professional. “I came here to look for evidence.”

“Would you like me to join you in your search?”

Rather than answering him I asked, “Did you find out what caused his death?”

“Since I haven’t started the autopsy, I’d only be guessing.”

Again, I remained silent.

Jon said, “I can see why Walt didn’t want to leave this beautiful place.”

Surprised by his comment, I asked, “Do you miss the city?”

“Not in the least. The countryside, filled with trees, wildlife, and other life forms provides a balance to my morbid line of work.”

He changed the subject. “I’ve thought about your theory and wondered if you think the intruder had a vehicle?”

“He probably left it near the road so as not to wake Walt. Maybe he was running toward it to flee Walt’s pursuit.”

“Guess the intruder could’ve hidden a car in the woods and walked to Walt’s place, but I still think Walt had a crazy moment, destroyed his crosses, and erratically ran through the woods to the road where he died.”

“Your scenario isn’t logical.”

Then I thought, *Nor was the fact Walt was an ex convict.*

E.B. Sullivan § 32

Chapter Nine

Walt’s Things

After Jon drove away, still reeling from the incredulous news, I stepped inside Walt’s cottage. Although it was chilly, thinking I’d be leaving before dusk and knowing it would take hours to warm the space, I opted not to make a fire.

Standing in his living room, I stared at a wall of shelves containing his record collection. The large selection of 78s best represented Walt's preference to live in a time warp. He played classical pieces and Gregorian Chants on his old turntable. When I gave him a CD player, he wouldn't accept it. He said he was fond of hearing the familiar scratches accompanying his favorites.

Although he didn't own a television, he kept up with the latest world news events via radio broadcasts and magazine articles.

His guitar oddly turned face down behind an easy chair made me wonder why I hadn't noticed it earlier. Walt had always treated his instrument with great respect. I realized he could've easily knocked it over in the dark when he went from the kitchen to his bedroom to get his shotgun.

Wanting to take the tension off the strings, I almost reached for it, but thought just in case the intruder had touched it I'd come back in the morning and dust the guitar for prints.

My mind wandered to the fun times we shared. Walt especially enjoyed playing folk songs. Although I couldn't carry a tune, he encouraged me to sing along with him by saying, "Your voice brings back pleasant memories. It reminds me of the times my sister and I performed duets together."

33 § Tainted Cross

He rarely spoke of his past, but I never thought of him as secretive.

I turned my attention to the bookcases Walt had made. They flanked either side of the stone hearth. Every shelf crowded with publications reminded me of his leisure pastime. His reading tastes were eclectic to say the least. His interests spanned from science fiction to religious history. He also had medical journals, law books, and librettos from various operas.

Many a time I borrowed one of his novels. Although none had been best sellers, each story touched me, made me think, and left lasting impressions.

He recommended I read philosophy books so we could debate theories. Regardless of my position, to challenge me he'd take an opposing one.

There were also how-to-do books covering a wide range of subjects including engineering, mechanics, cooking, and gardening.

My favorites were his art books. I could sit for hours peering at the exquisite glossy photographs. Tears welled under my lids. How I'd miss hearing him sing, learning from him, and laughing with him about any number of subjects.

Regardless of his criminal past, nothing could dissuade me from believing Walt had a glorious soul. Knowing I needed to get on with my investigation, I shifted my attention to the base of his bookcases. I peered at drawers I'd never seen opened.

Feeling guilty for invading Walt's privacy, I forced myself to open one. Serving as a file cabinet it had labeled hanging folders. I sifted through paid bills mostly from utility and phone companies.

In the next drawer, I found a metal box and removed its lid. In front of a stack of ledgers was an unmarked manila envelope.

E.B. Sullivan § 34

I pulled out hand written pages entitled *My Confession*.
35 § Tainted Cross

Chapter Ten

Walt's Confession

Dear Reader:

Although I've participated in the sacrament of reconciliation with several priests, their absolutions were meaningless because I lacked contrition and kept offending God.

The Lord, of course, is aware of every move I've made, every thought I've had, and every sin I've committed.

Having a need to purge myself of guilt, I've chosen to write this epistle for anyone who cares to read it after my death.

I'll start with the event that forever changed my planned path in life.

As a candidate for priesthood, before taking the sacrament of holy orders, I returned home from the seminary to reflect upon my decision.

Thoughts rattled in my mind.

Was I good enough to become a priest?

Would I be strong enough to keep such a lofty commitment?

Was I a true believer of the Catholic faith?

Going home probably wasn't the best idea. My non religious parents didn't hide their disdain for my vocation. They openly frowned upon my decision to become a priest. They thought me a fool to work for meager compensation, follow orders from strangers, and live anywhere church officials sent me.

As usual, their home was chaotic. My mother and father each complained about the other. He said she didn't keep the house clean or cook decent meals. She said

E.B. Sullivan § 36

because he didn't bring home enough money to feed his family she had to work and didn't have time for chores. In my absence, they continued their nightly drinking, their incessant bickering, and their blatant neglect of their parenting responsibilities.

My seventeen-year old brother, Ray, was out of control, using drugs, and failing out of his senior high school year. My poor sister, Mary, rather than being a typical happy sixteen-year old, was lost in a world of emotional isolation.

Selfishly wanting to fulfill what I believed was my calling, I'd left my brother and sister to fend for themselves while I indulged in the serenity of theological studies.

On the night before I returned to the seminary, I felt more intent than ever to be ordained. While our parents were boozing it up at their favorite hangout, Mary, Ray, and I played a game of Parcheesi.

Ignoring our sister's presence Ray told me, "I've got to get my girlfriend out of jam."

In my naiveté I asked, "What's the problem?"

“She’s pregnant.”

I didn’t ask how he felt about fathering a child or ask him to explore his moral responsibilities to his unborn babe. I didn’t ask to meet his girlfriend, offer to talk to her, wonder how she felt or what she wanted to do. As if I were a radio social worker answering an anonymous call, I told him she could stay in a maternity home and suggested she put her baby up for adoption.

“I’ll tell her,” he said.

Although I doubted he would, like a cowardly stranger, I didn’t challenge him.

In the next breath he suggested, “How about we get pizza? I’m starving.”

Before I could respond, he was on the phone ordering our two favorites.

My sister wanted to go with us to the pizzeria.

37 § Tainted Cross

To my surprise, Ray who usually thought her a nuisance said, “Sure, kid.”

Since I didn’t trust his reckless style behind the wheel, especially with my sister in the car I insisted upon driving. Without putting up a fuss, he sat quietly in the backseat as I drove to the strip mall and parked.

When we were out of the car, Ray said, “You two pick up the pizzas. I have a quick errand to run.” It was almost five o’clock and being winter, it was already dark.

I didn’t pay attention to which store he entered. After picking up the pies, Mary and I sat in the car. She asked, “When did you know God wanted you to become a priest?”

“Guess I was about your age when I first felt it was His will.”

“I think God wants me to do His work, too.”

“Really? And I thought you went to Mass with me just so we’d have more time together.”

“You know I love being with you.”

I tousled her hair.

As if they were sunbeams, her lips formed a bright smile. “After you left, I missed you so much. When I went to church, I felt close to you. And the cross you made me,

the Easter cross is my favorite treasure.”

“Glad to hear you kept it.”

“If I can, I’ll keep it near me forever.” She told me, “I’m pretty sure I want to be a nun and teach at a Catholic school. From what I’ve heard, there’s a need.”

“Any kid would be lucky to have a kind Sister like you. Have you told Mom and Dad?”

Just then, Ray opened the car’s backdoor ending my conversation with Mary. I glanced at him. Even in the dim light, I could see beads of sweat on his forehead. He didn’t say a word as I slowly eased out of the parking spot and

E.B. Sullivan § 38

drove home, but when I turned into the driveway, uncharacteristically, he insisted I put his car in the garage. The next day, while waiting to board a bus to return to the seminary, I read the daily paper. One story in particular got my full attention. It was about a robbery at a jewelry store. The owner, apparently alone just before closing time, was shot and killed. When I saw the address, I shivered, because it was in the same strip mall I’d been to the previous evening, five stores down from the pizzeria. Truthfully, it never occurred to me that Ray was the thief and shooter.

Two weeks later, following the seminary’s evening vespers, a detective read me my rights and a police officer put my wrists in handcuffs. Thinking they’d made a terrible mistake, I hung my head in shame and prayed for the matter to be quickly rectified.

In a state of confusion, I spent the night huddled in the corner of a group jail cell. Despite my professed spiritual convictions, rather than seeing Jesus in each of the men, I peered at the rough looking bunch with contempt and fear.

In the following days, as I came to understand the authorities’ overwhelming evidence justifying the charges against me I was terrified by the possibility of having to remain in jail for an unspecified period.

When Ray learned the state would try him as an adult, rather than opting for a trial, he accepted a plea. Along with his full confession, he told the police where he’d hidden most of the jewelry. He implied he was merely following my plan to steal the jewels. Considering Ray a

vulnerable teenager, it must've seemed plausible I orchestrated the crime, because the DA's deal reduced Ray's sentence from life to forty years in a maximum prison.

39 § Tainted Cross

Due to her young age, my sister wasn't charged. She vouched for me being with her the entire time Ray had robbed the jewelry store.

Having no money to pay for an attorney, I accepted an inexperienced, overworked public defender to represent me. As the getaway driver, I faced charges of accessory to robbery and murder.

The judge referring to me as a "lowlife criminal hiding behind the cloak of religious respectability" gave me a twenty-year sentence. A charitable parole board released me in ten.

While Ray was in county jail, his girlfriend gave the police the jewels he'd given her to pay for an abortion. Without any money, she attempted to abort her child using a coat hanger. Hours later, she hemorrhaged and died.

As I prayed for her soul, pangs of guilt tormented me. If only I'd insisted upon seeing her, talking to her, helping her, maybe she and her baby, my niece or nephew, would be alive.

During the first few months of incarceration, I went from being angry with Ray to realizing I'd failed him. Like my parents, out of touch with reality I denied the magnitude of his problems. I spent agonizing hours wallowing in remorse for ignoring the needs of those closest to me. Feeling unworthy, I accepted God's obvious pronouncement of me being unfit to be a priest.

One day, the Holy Spirit awakened me from self pity. I felt a burning desire to spread God's word to my fellow inmates. Resistance from prisoners, sometimes in the form of physical assaults only strengthened my resolve. Feeling it was my cross to bear their opposition, I endured their brutality.

In time, by sheer determination and persistence, I gained respect from the general population and a small group of inmates joined me on a repentant journey.

Upon my release, as a parolee, I couldn't continue preaching or reading Holy Scripture to felons. And I couldn't visit Ray.

Unable to find steady employment, to support myself I carved religious items.

One notch above begging, I sold the trinkets on busy city street corners.

41 § Tainted Cross

Chapter Eleven

Walt's Heart

A jumble of feelings ranging from sadness to horror pricked my already bleeding heart and pounded my aching head.

Walt having to give up his vocation, one he was obviously suited to, seemed like a tragedy. His unjust conviction and the years he served in prison for a crime he didn't commit seemed ludicrous.

In my dazed state, I wasn't sure how long my phone had been ringing. Reluctant to speak to anyone, I checked to see who was calling.

Since it was Jon, I took the call.

He asked, "Are you still at the deceased's house?" On a personal level, perhaps, not ready to admit Walt was Lawrence Walter Boone, I didn't want to tell Jon about my dear friend's confession. Professionally I knew I had to show it to my uncle, the sheriff, and Jon, as the county's medical examiner might need to see it as well. While I was pondering whether to share the information now or later Jon explained, "When I returned to the morgue and resumed examining Walt, I made another discovery. He had irritation marks on his chest leading me to believe he may have worn patches, possibly nitroglycerin ones. If I'm correct, your friend may have had angina, a coronary artery disease. I'd like to swing by his place to search his trash for a disposed patch and his drawers for unused ones."

"I'm still at his cottage. I'll conduct a search and get

back to you.”

“Don’t linger too long. There’s a chance a snow storm will arrive early this evening.”

E.B. Sullivan § 42

“Since I walked here, I intend to leave before sundown.”

“Would you like me to pick you up? We could go to dinner.”

“Thanks, but I’d prefer being alone.”

“It might help to talk about your friend.”

“I appreciate your kind gesture, but I’m really tired.”

After I ended the call, I realized I hadn’t mentioned Walt’s confession. Due to its private nature, maybe it was better to show it to my uncle before sharing it with Jon.

Determined to prove him wrong, I went into Walt’s bathroom. Although Jon had already looked in Walt’s medicine cabinet and drawers below his sink, I checked them again. The only items stored were an economy size bottle of aspirins, comb, brush, toothpaste, toothbrush, Q tips, tissue boxes, and toilet paper rolls.

In his trash, I found a used patch neatly folded inside a crumpled tissue.

My heart sank. *How long had Walt suffered from chest pains?*

In his nightstand drawer, I found a package of nitroglycerin patches.

It was just like selfless Walt not to tell me anything about his problems.

Selfishly, I’d never asked him how he was feeling or what he was thinking. He always seemed so strong and healthy. Anyone looking at Walt would’ve guessed he was much younger than his actual age.

Other than the patches, I hadn’t seen any other medication. I wondered if he accepted his condition and refused additional medical advice.

Although I’d spent so much time with Walt, I realized I knew very little about him. Ours was a one sided relationship. He gave and I took. Shame washed over me and initiated a resurgence of tears.

When I regained my composure I tried to contact Jon, but my call went straight to his voicemail. I left a message.

“You were right. I found the nitro patches.” I placed my phone on the coffee table.

Glancing at the front window, I watched drifting snow flurries.

In case Jon’s warning was accurate I promised myself once I finished reading Walt’s confession, I’d rush directly home.

E.B. Sullivan § 44

Chapter Twelve

Walt’s Confession Continued

Years earlier, during my incarceration, I’d received a letter of farewell from my sister, Mary.

My Dear Brother:

Since we last spoke, I’ve taken a vow renouncing my past life. Therefore, upon your release from prison, notify the convent’s Mother Superior of your whereabouts. She’ll send you the beautiful Easter cross you made me. When you gaze at your inspirational work, know it helped me find abiding peace and joy. Please keep it safe until Ray completes his sentence. I promised it to him, because he hopes it can bring him spiritual fulfillment similar to mine. I trust you’ll carry out my wishes.

Love, Your Sister in Christ

After establishing a work routine and moving from the halfway house into my own studio apartment, I contacted the abbess who mailed me Mary’s Easter cross. When I lifted it from its box, although I thought it was my imagination, it felt heavier than it should be. I opened the back compartment and found Mary’s pink rosary beads.

Clutching them transported me to the day I’d given her the cross.

Her expressive reaction pleased me.

“It’s so pretty,” she said. “Unlike a crucifix displaying Christ’s agony, it will always remind me of His glorious resurrection. Thank you so very much.”

“Turn it round,” I instructed. “There’s a hidden surprise.”

45 § Tainted Cross

When she opened a small trapdoor, she removed pink rosary beads and screeched with delight. “They’re my favorite color.”

“They were blessed by Bishop Moran,” I told her. I put the beads on the table and examined the compartment. It was smaller than I had fashioned it. Upon closer inspection, I saw a well-concealed additional piece of wood like a thick shelf wedged in the space. Using pliers, I pried it loose.

To my amazement, I discovered a hole burrowed in the roof of the original chamber. I shook the cross, but nothing fell out. With a tweezers, I poked upward until I grabbed a wad of cotton. When I removed it, diamonds came cascading onto and bouncing off the tabletop.

What a fool, I’d been. Over the years, I was elated to read Ray’s letters. After Mary told him about her taking her vows, he talked about his journey of repentance. Many times, he reminded me she promised to give him her Easter cross. He said its image represented salvation, even for his worthless soul. I encouraged him to speak to the inmates about his conversion. He assured me he was carrying out God’s work, and I naively believed him. In his last letter, he wrote,

I can’t wait to hold Mary’s Easter cross. I feel certain it will keep me on a path of happiness for all the days of my life.

Now I knew the true meaning of his words and understood why he wanted Mary’s cross. Following the robbery and shooting, according to plan, he must have stuffed the diamonds in her Easter cross.

I examined the altered chamber, recognizing his skilled craftsmanship.

He and I learned how to whittle from our grandfather. Although a bit cantankerous, from what our mother said, her father had mellowed with age. Some of my

fondest memories were of him telling us about the days he

E.B. Sullivan § 46

traveled on horseback across America. He described a host of animals he encountered. We'd sit for hours outside his country shack. Ray and I each with a stick of wood and a knife in our hands, fueled by his engrossing stories, fashioned a variety of critters. Ray was better at carving than I was, but he lacked the discipline or interest to complete projects.

As I placed the many diamonds in a jar, I was perplexed.

During the criminal investigation, there was no mention of Ray stealing diamonds. Apparently, the man he shot and killed, the owner of the jewelry shop, hadn't had a chance to add the stones to his inventory list.

Wild thoughts invaded my mind. Maybe the jeweler had obtained the diamonds illegally and therefore wouldn't have recorded their existence.

Farfetched musing convinced me that Ray had received a tip about the owner having smuggled or stolen diamonds.

Recalling the man my brother killed, an elderly gentleman, was a childless widower, contributed to my misguided decision of not giving the diamonds to the authorities. I also admit I was afraid if I turned in the stones, the police would assume I'd taken them from someone else and send me back to jail.

Truly wanting to atone for my former sins, I came up with a plan. I thought I could buy back God's favor with the murdered jeweler's diamonds.

Rather than relying on religious values, I focused on my prison education. My criminal minded teachers taught me about larceny, deception, manipulation, and all sorts of extraneous ways to commit illegal acts. Having grown up in an unsavory neighborhood, I knew a few things about the sordid underground world.

Using my combined illicit skills, after completing my parole obligation, I fenced one of the diamonds.

Astonished by the amount of money it reaped, I learned its cut was a round brilliant, meaning its top and bottom facet placements were exactly perpendicular.

With cash in hand, I traveled far from my hometown. Using an assumed name, Walt Logan, spending a fraction of the diamond's proceeds, I purchased property in a rural area.

While building my cottage, I learned of a neighbor's plight. A series of events brought a widow to the brink of financial ruin. Following a fatal car accident, claiming the lives of her husband and their two youngest children, she learned she had muscular dystrophy. Anxiety and stress from overwork weakened her. Within months, her symptoms intensified to the point of her losing her factory position. Not being able to pay her bills her house went into foreclosure. Her story, although different, reminded me of the Book of Job.

Using the utmost discretion, I paid off her mortgage and set up a trust fund for her.

My heart swelled with pride. My choice, although depraved, had made a positive difference in someone's life. Feeling I could bestow this goodness on others, I investigated news articles, hung around hospitals, and in various ways searched for people in dire need. Unfortunately, the list of suffering folks far exceeded my stolen resources.

Wanting to help as many people as possible, I liquidated the diamonds. Although a novice investor, my holdings multiplied. The more money I gave away, the more my assets increased often replenishing the dollar amount of my donations. As if guided by providence, utilizing various diversification strategies, in the last forty plus years, I accumulated enough cash to spread monies in multiple directions.

Make no mistake. I gave away someone else's treasure merely to gratify my selfish ego. As if rejuvenating

E.B. Sullivan § 48

my years in the seminary, I felt like I had a vocation. My twisted mind believed, from the roots of evil I could

conjure up goodness.

My ledgers contain detailed information regarding each recipient of the contaminated money. My aim in keeping records was to protect the innocent. In case some day any of these individuals needed proof of how they came upon the unexplained funds, this information would be available.

Once I'm gone, I wouldn't be adverse to each of them learning that I felt God was instrumental in me picking them, but I'm not sure He would agree.

Just before Ray was up for parole, the prison warden informed me during an altercation, Ray's cellmate, a young man named Calvin Lemming, killed Ray with a shiv he'd made from a glass shard. As punishment, Ray's murderer had many years tacked on to his sentence.

Now that Ray and the diamonds are gone, my purpose—although immoral—on earth is complete. I sense my heart won't hold out much longer. I'm ready to die and face the Lord's judgment. Sincerely,

Lawrence Walter Boone

49 § Tainted Cross

Chapter Thirteen

Walt's Intruder

The gray sky cast a dreary ambiance around me. In the dimming light, a steady stream of tears strained my weary eyes. After tucking Walt's confession back in the unmarked envelope, I blinked a few times, attempting to clear my vision.

I now realized the Easter cross and the pink rosary beads Walt gave me were gifts for his sister. Learning the cross was a hiding place for the stolen diamonds, I understood why Walt called it tainted.

I opened one of the ledgers and began reading. It provided detailed accounting records of how Walt gave away proceeds reaped from the diamonds. Flipping through pages of his other records, the staggering number of people he'd helped somehow didn't surprise me. It was consistent

with Walt's character to give and give, and give.

Having unveiled his life of benevolence, I tucked away the ledgers and envelope in the metal box and stowed it in the drawer.

Prompted by a farfetched notion that Ray's ex cellmate could be after the diamonds I sent a text to my uncle.

Is a Calvin Lemming still serving a sentence for murdering his cellmate, Raymond Boone? If not, Lemming could be a person of interest in Walt's case.

I placed my cell phone back on the coffee table. Too shaken to leave, attempting to digest all I'd learned about Walt I sat on the couch and reached for his throw. Ensnared in the soft material, inhaling his clean scent, my heavy lids fluttered. At some point, I must have dozed off, because at the sound of a click from the backdoor, my eyes popped open.

E.B. Sullivan § 50

The room was dark.

A flicker of light from the kitchen made my heart race.

Had Walt's intruder returned?

Was he looking for the diamonds hidden in the Easter cross?

What would he do if he discovered me?

A riot of fear made it impossible for me to think. Within seconds, I heard someone enter Walt's bedroom. I knew when the intruder didn't find any Easter crosses in there he'd continue his search in the living room. Responding to a primal instinct, I slithered off the sofa onto the floor.

Slowly crawling toward the door, my foot hit Walt's guitar. As if strummed, a chord sounded. *Had the intruder heard the twang?*

Panic propelled me to stand, open the front door, and step outside.

Apparently, sometime while I slept, the temperature dropped and froze a thin layer of snow.

As I dashed across the porch, my body slid on the icy surface and down the short flight of steps. I touched my

pockets searching for my cell. An image of me resting it on the coffee table, flashed in my mind.

Face down on the frosty surface I pondered sliding under the raised porch to hide.

Loud footfalls triggered a surge of energy enabling me to roll away from the cottage, rise to my feet, and start running.

Without looking back, I felt the intruder gaining on me.

Was this how the would-be thief felt when Walt pursued him?

Like Walt, did this man carry a deadly weapon?

Did he have Walt's shotgun?

51 § Tainted Cross

Dominating terror distorted my reasoning ability. I felt disoriented.

Without realizing it, I had a strong advantage. My unconscious mind knew every inch of these woods. On this moonlit night, a shimmering glow on the peaks of ice crystals topped the dusting of snow. Fortunately, Jon's predicted snowstorm hadn't arrived yet. Having memorized the trodden down deer runs, I meandered through glistening trees.

Exerting my reserve strength excruciating pangs accompanied my labored breaths. With the dropping temperature, the rime crunched louder than gravel underfoot.

When a light flashed before me, I knew the intruder was close by.

Thoughts flooded my mind,

Was I leading this criminal straight to my house endangering my parents?

Would I'd be able to save us by giving the intruder what he wanted, the original Easter cross?

Would he believe me, if I told him about Walt liquidating the stolen diamonds into a waterfall of benevolent gifts?

Would my words be enough to cause the man to leave me unharmed?

"No," I screamed in my head. "This man,

responsible for Walt's death, needed to be apprehended and incarcerated.”

A blast hitting a tree truck inches from my head, reminded me of the intruder's demented mind. *Had the shot alerted my parents?*

Even if they'd heard it, assuming it was from a poacher's gun, knowing he'd immediately grab his kill and flee the area, they probably wouldn't report it to the sheriff.

Frantic now, my legs, encased in wet heavy denim, moved at record speed.

E.B. Sullivan § 52

As if to protect my mom and dad, my steps headed in a twisted circular route back toward Walt's place. Suddenly, clouds blocked the moon and an overcast sky robbed me of valuable light.

A veil of whiteness swirled in front of my already limited vision. Icy shards lashed my cheeks, covering my eyes making it difficult to see. My numb fingers attempted to clear my sight.

Although upset by the growing storm slowing my pace, I hoped it would hinder the intruder from finding me. Under my lightweight leather boots, frigid cold stung like needles into the soles of my feet. Every now and then, the slick surface gave way. As my right or left foot sank deep into icy pillow tops, snow trickled down my pants soaking my socks.

A light shone in my path and a booming voice shouted, “Stop or I'll shoot.”

I froze in place. Never before had I experienced such fear. Every fiber of my body trembled.

Reality set in telling me these could be my last moments on earth.

Preparing for death, I focused on the snowflakes falling before me and prayed.

A sudden urgency to fight for my life replaced my terror. Intent upon surviving I yelled. “Wait. I have the cross you're looking for.”

The light came closer blinding me.

I kept talking. “I know about the diamonds.”

Arms wrapped around me and a voice proclaimed,

“You’re safe.”

“Jon,” I whispered as I stepped back.

Within the glow of his lowered flashlight, I saw his handsome face.

“Be careful. Walt’s intruder is following me.”

“Your uncle has him in handcuffs.”

53 § Tainted Cross

Saturated by a sense of relief, I surrendered to an overwhelming fatigue and fell into Jon’s warm embrace.

E.B. Sullivan § 54

Chapter Fourteen

Walt’s Aftermath

With the record-breaking storm finally over, plowed dirty snow lined the streets as our town became alive with activity.

During my shift at the station, I peered through a one-way window while my uncle, the sheriff, interrogated Walt’s intruder, Calvin Lemming. When apprehended, he’d had a .44 Magnum pointed in my direction. Later, Deputy Wilson located Lemming’s truck hidden off the main road. Concealed under the back seat was Walt’s shotgun.

In contrast to my slightly overweight uncle, Lemming’s muscular frame punctuated his physical strength.

I realized aging Walt would never have been able to catch him. Running and exerting himself to the max, without wearing a nitro patch, Walt must’ve experienced acute pain.

Attempting to erase an image of my dear friend suffering, I refocused on the scene before me. A public defender, dressed in a dark suit and plain tie, sat beside the felon.

Perhaps believing there weren’t sufficient grounds for an indictment or thinking he could outsmart the authorities Lemming confessed. “Every time my cellmate, Ray, got a letter from his brother, Larry, he’d tell me what a

sucker the guy was. He'd say it served Larry's sanctimonious ass right to have served time in the slammer. Ray bragged about being a lot brighter than his holier than thou brother who, if you could believe it, wanted to be a Jesuit priest. Seems Ray nixed Larry's dream by getting the chump arrested.

55 § Tainted Cross

"Can't count the times Ray told me he'd duped the police by stealing a hot load of diamonds and stashing them in a special cross Larry had made. Without me asking, Ray described it. It wasn't one of those regular crucifixes. Nah. His brother covered it with carved white flowers making it real pretty so he could give it to their kid sister.

"Ray laughed at her unknowingly hiding the jewels and taking the cross with her when she joined a convent. "He always left his letters where I could see them. When I read about his sister giving their brother the cross to hold for Ray, I memorized exactly where Larry lived. Just before Ray was up for parole, I made my move preventing him from ever leaving the joint. Too bad someone ratted on me and I had to do a longer stretch." As if working hard to push down his anger, he grimaced.

"When I finally got out, I scoped out Larry's place. Even though a long time had passed, I knew Larry would still have the cross and from Ray had said I figured Larry was clueless about the diamonds.

"On the night I carried out my plan I waited until Larry was asleep before I went inside his unlocked workshop. When he found me searching for his special cross, I tried to tell him about the diamonds. I offered to be his partner. I intended to tell him I had the connections to sell the stones and to tell him he'd be rich, but the old goat cocked his gun.

"He left me no other choice but to run for my life. Not able to find the tricky path from his workshop to the gravel road, I ended up fighting my way in the dark through the woods.

"The fool chased me.

"When I heard a noise behind me, even though it put me in danger, I tracked back. Seeing the old geezer on the ground I went to help him, but he was already gone." The sheriff

asked, “And you took his shotgun?”

E.B. Sullivan § 56

Calvin shrugged his shoulders. “Dead men don’t need guns.”

“And?”

He shook his head. “With the possibility of the police sniffing around during the day, I waited until nightfall to return to the old guy’s place. To my surprise, I didn’t find the cross in his unlocked house. When I heard noises, I saw a chick running away. I figured it was his old lady. Thinking she knew where the cross was, I followed her into the woods just to talk to her.”

He stared at my uncle. “You got to believe me. I wasn’t going to hurt her or anything. I thought I was doing her a favor ‘cause I knew how to make her a bundle. I only fired a shot to get her attention, to get her to stop and listen.”

Calvin’s lawyer piped up, “As you can plainly see my client is innocent of all charges. He didn’t steal a thing or harm anyone.”

My heart shouted, “How can you say that when this man took my best friend’s life.” I prayed Lemming would spend the rest of his years behind bars.

The previous day, I had shown Walt’s letter and ledgers to my uncle and Jon. Yet, I was surprised when the sheriff shared Walt’s secret philanthropic history with Lemming.

Calvin scratched his head saying, “Well I’ll be. Guess Larry never stopped being the do-gooder type.”

I whispered, “Amen to that.”

57 § Tainted Cross

Chapter Fifteen

Walt’s Wake

A few days later, sitting with my mom and dad in their living room, an attorney read instructions from Walt’s trust. He’d set up a more substantial 401K retirement fund than

my father had expected.

He'd named my mother the beneficiary of his annuity and she'd receive monthly payments until her death.

He'd left me his property. Along with it was a savings account. He emphasized it contained money he earned from his carving business. He also designated a sum of money to pay off my student loans.

Goosebumps preceded my tears. Even after his death, he continued to shower my family with his remarkable generosity.

In the afternoon, Jon gave me a copy of his autopsy report. It concluded that Walt died of natural causes, specially an acute myocardial infarction commonly referred to as a massive heart attack.

Once again, Jon asked me to dinner.

"Guess I owe you for saving my life."

Early that evening, sitting across from him at a Mexican restaurant, we tapped our Margaritas and made a toast to Walt. I asked Jon, "How'd you know I was in trouble?"

"I called your cell. When you didn't answer, I phoned your dad. He said you hadn't come home yet.

"Believing your theory about an intruder wanting a specific cross, I thought the thief would return to search Walt's house. Afraid of what he'd do if he found you there, I drove out to Walt's place. As a precaution, I asked Scott

E.B. Sullivan § 58

to meet me. Once the information came in about Lemming out on parole, Deputy Wilson joined the party." Jon encouraged me to talk about my beloved friend. Welcoming his suggestion, I flooded Jon with stories about Walt. Impressed by Jon's attentiveness and his sympatric responses I gladly agreed to us having dinner together in the near future.

Reflecting her love and respect for Walt, my mother made detailed funeral arrangements.

With the ceremony's date set, my father made countless phone calls and sent letters informing folks of the person responsible for their mysterious past good fortunes. Providing details garnered from Walt's meticulous records,

the recipients, although mystified, easily accepted the truth.

Half hour before the service began, while a chorus sang inspirational hymns, the Catholic Church, beautifully decorated with flowers, overflowed with mourners.

During the Requiem Mass, a line of people expressed appreciation for the gifts Walt had bestowed upon them.

A middle-aged woman came to the podium, “When I was seventeen I had renal failure. If it wasn’t for Walt paying for my dialysis and all the bills incurred for my kidney transplant I wouldn’t be here today.”

A hospital administrator said, “Walt made a large donation to our hospital in order to complete a special children’s wing.”

A pharmaceutical company’s representative said, “He gave sizable contributions to our research.” A neighboring farmer said, “He paid my mortgage payments when my tractor chewed up my leg.” An elderly woman said, “Thirty years ago, Walt anonymously deposited an amount of money equivalent to a year of my salary into my checking account. With those funds I was able to spend the last months with my husband as he lost his battle with leukemia.”

59 § Tainted Cross

Jon squeezed my hand.

I returned the gesture acknowledging gratitude for his growing friendship.

Staring at the original Easter cross resting beside an urn containing his ashes, I wondered if Walt had something to do with placing Jon in my path. Was Walt pointing me in a direction of expanding friendship or something more? Despite my sorrow, I looked forward to finding out.

Jon whispered, “Sounds like the consensus is Walt was more of a saint than a sinner.”

Jon gently wiped a tear from my cheek.

Responding to his kindness, I smiled and stared into his light blue eyes.

Before the next person spoke, I told Jon. “Recalling my wondrous experiences with Walt and thinking of what I’ve since learned about him, my heart says just like his tainted cross, he was flawed yet perfect.” E.B. Sullivan § 60