

Catching Cassandra

by Odyne *La Fée*

“There is in every one of us, even those who seem to be most moderate, a type of desire that is terrible, wild, and lawless.” Plato, *The Republic*

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Intended for Adult Audiences Only:

*Sexual Violence

*Adult Content

*Language

4 Veda

“Do you think it was murder?” Detective Eric Pfluger asked as Ashlyn entered the break room in search of him.

“I don’t know,” she said shaking her head. “What do you think?”

Ashlyn handed the detective the photos that had just moments before been delivered by courier to the Austin Police Department. “They were addressed to me personally Eric,” she said as Dt. Pfluger studied the photos silently. “Damn,” he said a moment later, shaking his head. “It sure as shit looks like it. Damn. And I was just starting to like the fella.”

Detective Pfluger, a 12-year-vet of the Special Investigations Unit, was the deceptive type of old that was easy to mistake. Nearly 40, he looked, at once, both much older, and much younger... Not unlike Luke Evans really.

Ashlyn just stared up at the mercurial man.

“What?” he asked with his mouth half-full of Round Rock donuts.

Ashlyn had first met Police Chief Emile Asencio at a symposium on forensic psychology two years earlier, when, just about to graduate, she’d been given a spot as a featured speaker. Her topic, *Competency Evaluations Pertaining to Dissociative Disorders*, had been thought of as ground-breaking, and upon the completion of the symposium she’d received a number of appealing job offers.

But it had been Police Chief Asencio’s proclamations of developing of a new Profiling Unit that he envisioned Ashlyn would eventually head, that had influenced her decision the most.

Yet, here it was, two-plus years later, and Ashlyn was still playing second fiddle to a less competent boss, in a unit that only saw sporadic activity at best.

For all practical purposes... Ashlyn’s career was totally and completely stalled.

Of course, that had been before the Cassandra case.

Before the entire department, no, the entire force, had been placed under the severe scrutiny of the International Media. Even now the media trolls were turning the sleepy music town on its head.

“I’ve got Martinez and Ely running down the courier now, but so far it looks like it was paid for with a stolen card.” Ashlyn looked up at the man that was significantly taller than her. Detective Pfluger, an ever-observant man, slumped into a near-by-chair.

“It was addressed to me personally,” Ashlyn said the last flatly.

“How did they know I’m working on the case?” She asked of the native Texan

“That fact wasn’t released in any statements. How did they know?”

Dt. Pfluger, his left hand deep inside a box of sugar-coated donuts, shook his head twice. “We have a leak.”

For the next few minutes the two silently scanned the handful of photos spread out on the break-room table.

“What do I do?” Sadly, Ashlyn’s voice hadn’t come out sounding anywhere as confident as she’d hoped it would.

With his chin in the palm of his hand, and his deep, hazel eyes a flat-mirror of everything she already felt, Dt. Pfluger said softly, “I don’t know. If you press charges he shuts up. Right now he’s talking. So why not let him sing while he’s sings? In the meantime I’ll put a tail on him and make sure he doesn’t go anywhere.”

It was the answer she’d been hoping for, and Ashlyn didn’t bother trying to hide her sigh of relief.

“Besides,” he said, almost as a side, as he shoved another donut into his mouth.

“If we charge him now and the photos turn out fake, we’ll be the one looking like complete fucks.”

Dt. Pfluger stood up and dragged his left sleeve across his powdered-sugar covered lips. “If not... we’d have to call in Homicide.”

Ashlyn nodded her agreement. Dt. Pfluger nodded once and then patted her on the back. “We also have to consider whether or not our mystery informant is gonna to send the photos to the media.”

Ashlyn’s wide eyes were enough to tell the detective she hadn’t yet worked her way around to that option yet.

“Don’t worry. I think we’ve got at least a few hours, maybe even a day or two before that happens.”

“Why do you say that?” Ashyn asked, truly perplexed.

“Because they don’t already have them.”

Eric looked meaningfully at Ashlyn from the doorway, “look, I’m getting it from every angle on this one. Get your answers, and get ‘em fast.”

Ashlyn nodded once.

Then, before he could walk away she added in a low, thin voice, “Eric, this... woman was once somebody’s daughter, somebody’s baby, and then at a very young age she became someone’s sex slave, and whipping post. For her - words like ‘love’ and ‘affection’ don’t have the same meaning as they do for people like us. When she hears the word ‘love’, she sees grown men abusing frightened little girls. And when she thinks of ‘affection’, pain and humiliation are the only things that come to mind. For her everything about the world has been reversed.”

To Ashlyn’s great comfort the middle-aged man returned her gaze with a look of a great, and sad understanding.

“Cassandra wasn’t born evil Eric. Someone made her this way.”

“Then go and get them.” Dt. Eric Pfluger’s voice was sharp, and offered little evidence of the compassion that had just been present in his eyes.

But Ashlyn recognized the look almost at once as it was a common look among the former remnants of the Texas Rangers. A look that said; BY JUSTICE BE IT DONE. And simply put, it meant that no matter what stood in their way... Justice would be done.

Ashlyn was hopeful that this time, the sentiment would win out, over church, and politics and all the other regular bullshit that often stood in the way.

Back in her office, Ashlyn tried once again to reach Sister Cara Charity, the young nun she's spoken to at the convent. She'd tried a number of times over the past few days to reach the young woman, to see if she might fill-in some of the many gaping holes in Cassandra's past.

However, she'd been thwarted each and every time, either by the befuddled ramblings of Sister Dalphine, or by the equally ancient sounding answering machine.

So far, Ashlyn had left a half-dozen messages and was in the middle of leaving another, somewhat testy message, when the breathy-voice of a young man with a thick Irish accent picked up the line.

"Carmelite Convent of the Sacred Hearts."

"Yes! Hello. Yes, hello." Taken aback by her sudden turn of luck, Ashlyn had to search her brain for the reason she'd called.

"Yes, is a... is Sister Cara Charity available?"

"I'm sorry dear, she's at Vespers."

There was a short pause as Ashlyn wasn't quite certain what the young man was telling her. Obviously sensing her confusion, the man clarified. "She'll be in chapel 'til five-thirty, after that her cell for silent prayer. Can I possibly relay a message to her?"

"Yes, please. This is Dr. Ashlyn Veda of the Austin Police department and I'd very much like to speak with Sister Cara Charity... about the Cassandra Lethe case." Ashlyn realized she sounded like she was asking the man a question.

"Sister Cara you say?"

"Why... yes."

"How about I bring Sister Cara to you? When would you like her?"

"...Really?"

Ashlyn knew she sounded incredulous, but Sister Margaret Mary had made it perfectly clear that there was nothing on God's green earth that would compel these nuns to leave their convent.

Once there, they remained... interned forever.

"I think it might be best, don't you?" The friendly voice asked, once again reminding Ashlyn that she had no idea whom she was speaking to.

"I'm sorry, but who... who are you?"

"I'm sorry dear. I'm Father Mahoney, Father Cormac's replacement. I was away when you visited last time. You see, I divide my time between the Sacred Hearts and our church in

Ben. Had I been here when you visited, we might have cleared things up then. But... now..." His voice trailed off, as if he was weighing his words carefully.

"Tis probably best if you speak to Sister Cara on your turf."

"Sister Cara won't be punished for leaving the convent?" Ashlyn asked, fearing how stupid she sounded, yet still unable to not ask it.

The priest's breathy laugh was instant, and genuine, and thankfully, Ashlyn thought, not at all shaming. "Oh, my, no. Sister Cara won't get into any trouble. I can assure you of that."

"I'll just tell them it's a legal matter. You are requesting an official interview on behalf of the Austin Police Department, are you not?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well then, it's settled. When would you like to speak to her?"

"Is tomorrow too short of notice?"

"I'll have her there by eight."

"Perfect. Thank you Father."

"Don't mention it."

There was a brief pause. An inhaled breath. And Ashlyn could almost hear the unspoken words fighting upon the tip of the man's tongue.

Ashlyn let the silence linger as he worked up his courage. But when he did speak, the priest's words were not at all what she'd expected.

"How is she? Does she need for anything?" The concern in his voice was real, and bone deep.

Instantly Ashlyn began kicking herself. All along she had assumed the priest didn't know Cassandra because according to the records Ashlyn had, Cassandra had left the convent the day after Father Cormac had passed away.

"She's as well as can be expected. She's a survivor, if anything," Ashlyn told him truthfully.

"Ei, she's always been that... tankfully"

Ashlyn had always been an incredible judge of character. From as far back as she could remember she had possessed an innate sense of people. Call it intuition, call it perceptiveness, whatever it was, it was the reason she had become a psychiatrist in the first place. And she trusted this sixth-sense more than anything she'd ever learned in school.

And just now, that sense was telling her Father Mahoney had something to hide. Maybe it was how his voice went from light and breathy to low and resonant, or perhaps it was the slight tremble at the end. Whatever it was, Ashlyn knew Cassandra meant a great deal to this priest.

"In the morning then," the priest said, his words lifting up at the end, as if he would make the sentence a question.

"Yes, Thank you."



Falling asleep that night was impossible. Everything about the Cassandra case pricked at Ashlyn's mind as she lay there, desperate for sleep. And as her four-thirty alarm loomed ever-closer, she could tell sleep was no closer than when she'd first climbed into bed. She blamed it on the sinking feeling she had, that tomorrow things were only going to get worse. For some reason, Sister Cara's interview came to mind.

Still, staring up at the shadow-cast ceiling, Ashlyn dared to hope that maybe, just maybe, Sister Cara could at least shine some light on what had motivated Cassandra's immense cruelty.

And then there were the photos. If they're real, then Mason Harlow was a murderer and maybe, just maybe what happened in Cassandra's basement had been an act of revenge, or desperation.

As the night wore on Ashlyn's mind went round-and-round, over every little detail until finally, late, late into the night, she fell asleep.

Waking late the next morning, Ashlyn missed her lap-time, something that almost never happened, as the pool was one place Ashlyn didn't feel deficient. But though she hated missing it, she also knew that after the rough night before she wouldn't have had the strength for it anyway.

So, already off to a bad start, Ashlyn arrived at work much later than she'd planned. And already frustrated, she quickly became even more so when she was once again forced to deal with the obstinate lock on her office door. It was an old feud that began the first day she'd taken possession of the office. Originally assigned to Dr. Sullivan, the larger, more accessible office had been assigned to her shortly after her arrival in Austin.

Dr. Sullivan of course had never gotten over it. And apparently neither had the lock.

Sleepy, and loaded down with files, her laptop, and a medical reference book the size of Texas, Ashlyn confronted the stubborn lock by roughly jerking her keys back and forth as she tried, rather feebly, to force it into compliance.

"Why don't ya let me get that for ya dear?" a soft voice asked from somewhere over her shoulder.

And a moment later the files, and the ridiculously large reference book, were lifted from her arms. Free of the burden, Ashlyn was finally able to fit the key properly into the lock.

"Thanks," she said to the mysterious stranger who was looming somewhere behind her. "Normally it only sticks on Wednesdays and Fridays," she quipped, trying to make light of what was quickly becoming a reason for those telling-tears that always crept up in times like these.

But now the key was stuck and refused to turn. Ashlyn, growing redder and redder by the minute, wiggled the noncompliant key violently in the lock, and when it simply refused to work, she contemplated for just a split second, hurling her body against the door until it was beaten from its hinges.

“I don’t understand why it’s *so* difficult to keep even the simplest things functioning in this place,” she complained aloud, trying quite unsuccessfully to keep a lid on her rising anger.

Of course, it was then that Ashlyn realized she didn’t have any idea whom it was she was complaining to. Suddenly apprehensive, Ashlyn took a quick-peek over her right shoulder. And what she saw... the unrecognizable features of a stranger with a square jaw, high cheekbones and amazing green eyes, was definitely not anything she’d been expecting.

“It sticks sometimes. I just have to give it a...”

It was somewhere between the door flying open, and the moment it pulled her from her feet, that Ashlyn gave up any attempt at controlling the situation, along with any hope she was going to find a painless end to what was quickly becoming the most humiliating experience of her life.

A second before she could let out a scream of shock, a strong arm encircled Ashlyn’s waist and pulled her back to her feet.

And then suddenly there she was, miraculously, in the very place she’d always wanted to be – encased in the warm, firm-grip of an attentive man.

With her back pressed firmly against his too-warm stomach, Ashlyn felt the sweep of his breath across the back of her neck.

Through the thick taste of embarrassment in her mouth, Ashlyn manage a startled, “Oops”, and nothing else.

“You okay there dear?” the man asked, his mouth so near to her ear that all of the tiny hairs on her neck stood on end.

And suddenly she was laughing again. A full and throaty laugh this time. Straight from the bottom of her belly.

How many times had all-too-helpful bystanders, that, seeing her disability, rushed in to help? And no matter how polite they’d been, or how genuine their desire to help had been, it had ALWAYS offended her. And now, well... that offence was a well-worn reflex.

“I can do it!” she would often snap back.

She should have offered them ‘thanks’ instead of her aggression. For their intent, if not for the actual assistance itself. But the truth was, Ashlyn was just plain sick-and-tired of saying ‘thanks’, tired of needing help, and tired of people thinking she was somehow less-than just because she was different.

What do they say? ‘Doctor heal thyself’? It would sound like good advice if only Ashlyn could get past her anger. But that didn’t appear to be happening any time soon. Even now, as the strong arm of her would-be savior cradled her waist, there was still a small part of her that was screaming those four petulant words, “I can do it”. But this time there was also another part

of her, an entirely female part, that was screaming for her to *shut the hell up, and enjoy being in the arms of a very attractive man.*

Then, a second after being pulled into his arms, another thought occurred to her. *Oh my fucking god it's the priest!*

And suddenly Ashlyn was laughing again. Only this time, someone was laughing with her. Which of course caused her insecurities to quickly get the better of her, and soon her laugh turned into the strangled choking sound of a chicken with a wrung neck.

“You all right there dear?” the man asked, this time his voice distinctly accented.

Reluctantly, Ashlyn pulled herself away from the too-warm body. Then, with an embarrassed smile, she turned to face the priest.

“Yes, thank you,” she replied, in a voice that was steadier than she'd expected.

But seeing him standing there was way worse than she'd expected. And like firecrackers going off inside her head, Ashlyn's inner tourette went ballistic. And not because she had been scared, or even because she was horribly embarrassed. No, that would be entirely too sane. Instead, neurons were committing mass suicide, left and right inside her brain just then, because to her ever-lasting-chagrin, the most perfect man to ever have walked the planet was standing right *fucking* in front of her. And he was *a goddamn priest! Fucking cunt shit monkey slutting ho dogs* she thought; thankfully quite silently to herself.

But it was this irony, on-top-of-ironies that'd sent her reeling. Because if Ashlyn had a type, and she most certainly did, it would be this: six-foot tall, lean yet not lanky, well-muscled but not affected, light skinned, full lips, and hair the color of brass, that shoots out in all directions in a haphazard disarray of curls.

And his eyes, deep pools of green that seemed to bleed a steady-stream of warmth into the small space between them, were just the *fucking icing on the cake.*

Ashlyn recognized the irony at once, because in that split second, in learning that this perfect man actually exists, he was at the same moment snatched away, and held beyond all reach... promised to... of all things... *the fucking Catholic church.*

Fortunately, Ashlyn was in possession of herself enough to suppress the contemptuous snort she felt pulling at the back of her throat just then, but just barely.

Thankfully, her attention was quickly pulled away from the gorgeous priest and his unnerving smile and was instead cast upon the doe-eyed nun that was standing directly behind him.

Ashlyn gave the nervous woman a full and welcoming smile.

Then, turning her attention back to the priest, Ashlyn said, “I'm sorry. I'd say I'm not usually this clumsy... but that would be a lie.” Ashlyn couldn't help the blush, as she gave her legs a significant look.

“They're stronger than they appear.”

“I imagine very strong, to do this job,” the priest replied, as Ashlyn turned to enter her office. And whether it was his thick Irish accent, or just her insecurities getting the better of her, Ashlyn just couldn't help turning to see if the man was being sarcastic.

But by his bright smile and unassuming eyes, she was relatively sure he was being sincere. And yet any surety would be hard to come by with a man such as this. Because of course her attraction to him would no doubt cloud any assessment she would make of him.

Fortunately though, reading Sister Cara looked to be as easy as reading a primary school book.

With a sigh, Ashlyn slid into her chair and motioned for her guests to take a seat as well.

“Thank you again for coming. And thank you again...” she said directly to the priest. “That would not have been a graceful landing.”

“Happy to help,” he said returning her smile, as he held the chair for the nun.

Looking at the priest just then, in his sleek-black cassock and brilliant-white collar, Ashlyn could very well imagine that he too had fought his own battles with superficial assumptions.

Of course, that didn’t keep Ashlyn from watching and assessing, and even assuming all kinds of things herself, as he took a seat across from her.

“Thank you for bringing Sister Cara Charity here to talk. I hope you didn’t have to get up in the middle of the night to make it here so early,” Ashlyn said quickly.

For some reason, she’d envisioned the priest and the nun slipping away from the convent under the cover of darkness, trying desperately to avoid the hawk-like scrutiny of Sister Margaret Mary. However the priest’s answering smile, while both warm and pleasant, made Ashlyn realize just how stupid her assumption had been.

“We left yesterday, shortly after you called. We stayed in a lovely motel just north of the city. The trip was quite pleasant really.” The way his eyes danced when he spoke, Ashlyn couldn’t help thinking that he was enjoying himself immensely.

“That makes sense,” Ashlyn said, feeling more flustered than ever.

“You want I should wait outside?” the priest offered after a moment of uncomfortable silence.

“You can stay,” Ashlyn replied quickly. A little too quickly.

“So long as Sister Cara, may I call you Sister Cara?” Ashlyn looked directly at the woman who nodded meekly in reply. “... well then, if Sister Cara wants you to stay then it’s fine with me.”

Interviewing the nun in the presence of the priest was highly irregular, but something told Ashlyn that the extremely shy woman would be more forthcoming with the priest’s support than if she were on her own. No doubt he’d already taken her confession, on numerous occasions. And chances were he knew her better than she knew herself. After-all, Father Mahoney had been the Covent’s head priest ever since Father Cormac had died.

“You want I should stay, dear?”

Ashlyn estimated Father Mahoney to be the same age as, or perhaps slightly older than the terrified nun, but right then she could have easily forgotten that, as just then he seemed every bit the wise, old priest. And that extra sense of hers was giving her to think that this man, this priest, was so much more than he seemed.

Something about him, and Ashlyn didn't know what exactly, made her think the priest had suffered a great deal in his short life; had suffered and survived. But looking at him, looking into his bright, verdant eyes, Ashlyn knew, bone-deep, that though he'd survived he'd paid a terrible price.

Unfortunately, Ashlyn's sixth sense couldn't tell her what that meant, or how it affected her case, if it did. But she eyed him a bit more suspiciously, as he consoled the nun.

With a weak smile, Cara nodded at Ashlyn.

"Wonderful. Then, please, if we can get started. I have another appointment in a couple of hours and I'm assuming we'll need every minute. You've got quite a lot to tell me, don't you?" Ashlyn realized she'd said the last as if she'd been speaking to a child. But oddly enough, the sister didn't seem to mind.

Sitting perched on the edge of her seat, as if at any moment she would leap up and take flight, the nun looked first to Father Mahoney and then to Ashlyn. Father Mahoney, with his long, lean legs stretched out to one side, had one ankle resting on top of the other, and his hands folded neatly across his stomach, which gave him the look of being utterly relaxed.

Ashlyn by contrast, was a bundle of nerves.

With a smile to the pensive nun, Father Mahoney nodded for Ashlyn to begin.

"Ok then, since we all seem to be here for the same reason, to help Cassandra, and the only way I can do that is to truly understand her, and since I would have no idea what questions to ask to accomplish this, I think it would be best if you just told us in your own words, the story of how Cassandra came to the convent and of her time there, as you know it. Do you think you can do that?"

That bug-eyed, deer-in-the-headlights, look was back, and for a second Ashlyn wondered if she shouldn't have come up with some preliminary questions, if only to get the ball rolling.

The young priest gripped the nun's trembling hands and gave them a squeeze. Then he nodded his head again, ever so slightly, towards the doctor.

"I... I don't know. Where do I begin?" The woman's accent, while still sounding strongly of her Irish heritage was nowhere near as thick as the priest's.

"How about the day Cassandra arrived at the Convent? Do you remember the day she was brought to The Sacred Hearts?"

"Of course I do. I was the one that told Sister Margaret Mary we had visitors."

"Good. Then why don't you begin there. And, just try to tell me everything you remember, as it happened... like a story... the story of Cassandra. Okay?"

"Alright then."

The woman pushed back in her chair, so that her short legs dangled in front of her. And a moment later all fears Ashlyn had of a long and painful interview flew from her mind, as the girl threw herself into the task of telling Cassandra's tale.