

11. Fingers in the Pie

Martha didn't get a chance to talk to Father Arthur at Sunday services. Everybody kept crowding around him and she couldn't get through during breakfast or coffee hour. She wanted to tell him that she saw what Joanne had done at the rectory and that she was his witness. Maybe it would be better to talk to him privately at his house instead of at church, though. She understood this kind of thing. It was humiliating to admit that someone violated you. If he was too embarrassed to go to the authorities, maybe she would do it herself and save him the degradation. She knew about that too.

Martha decided to visit Father Arthur after he moved into the rectory where she knew his address. She had called the church and asked for his present address, but whoever answered the phone wouldn't give it to her when she refused to identify herself. It was none of their business who she was. This was strictly between her and Father. She was the only one who saw what had happened and she wouldn't tell anybody, though that girl deserved whatever she got for doing something so filthy and *shameful*.

Maybe she would drive by the rectory and see if anybody was there. It was Monday...maybe Father was moving in right now. Oh *yes!* She'd left her casserole on Saturday and she ought to get her dish back anyway. Of course!

Martha took an hour to make herself pretty and then squeezed behind the wheel of her Johnny Cash Cadillac humming a tuneless tune. The rectory wasn't far from her house...not close enough that she'd ever walk there, but three, maybe four blocks, which she could drive in under two minutes. As she approached the ranch-style home with the covered front porch, Martha slowed down to do some quick reconnaissance. She saw no obvious activity. Oh *good!* Maybe Father was there by himself. She drove her heavy car onto the curb across the street, knowing that was the best way to avoid leaving a wide gap. Parallel parking wasn't her thing.

At the front door, Martha rang the bell, but got no answer. She pulled the screen door open and put her ear to the wooden door, but heard nothing.

"Yoo hoo! Father!" she called, knocking. Still no response. "Humph," she grunted. Martha twisted the doorknob and it yielded. Someone had left the door

unlocked. “Well, no reason not to go in,” she decided and hauled herself up the four-inch threshold using the door jamb for support.

The rectory living room was a mess, looking much the same as it had on Saturday. Drop clothes covered the floors and the place stank of fresh paint. All the windows were open, but the smell hadn’t dissipated much. Martha wandered into the kitchen and saw that the cabinets had no doors. Father couldn’t live in the house in this condition, so he must not have moved in yet.

Martha opened the refrigerator door and found that it was stuffed *full* of food...casserole dishes stacked three high, covered stewpots, cake and pie pans filling every shelf. Her corn beef casserole with peas was still there. She recognized it by the blackened corners of the Pyrex dish. She could never scrub it hard enough to remove that grease, so she just cooked over top of it. She eased the casserole from the bottom of the stack and set it on some newspapers on the countertop. None of it was eaten, so she decided to take it home and eat it herself. Leaving the refrigerator door open, she wandered through the kitchen pulling out newly-painted drawers one by one until she found some plastic utensils wrapped in a cellophane package. She tore it open with her teeth, pulled the spoon from it, and returned to the fridge.

“What’s this?” She peeled back some aluminum foil and found half a meatloaf. She stuck in the spoon for a taste. “Mmm...yum. Who made this?” The spoon was too small to hold a good-sized mouthful, so she set it aside and poked two fingers through the surface of the shaped meat, scooping up a large bite. “Like an A-Rab,” she mumbled through a full mouth.

Martha quickly stuffed a couple more bites into her mouth while she pulled the pan from the fridge and set it aside. Beneath it was a round casserole dish with a flat glass lid. Lifting the lid, she was rewarded with half a fish pie. Though she wasn’t fond of fish, she was very fond of pie. Martha jammed three fingers through the pastry crust and scooped out some vegetables and gravy. A glob of it dropped through her fingers on the way to her mouth, but she ignored it.

“That’s what drop clothes are for,” she muttered.

The crust was better than the filling so Martha peeled off a palm’s worth of the pastry and gulped it down. Since only a little remained, she pulled off the rest of it and then carefully waded her fingers through the creamy stew and picked out the broken pastry bits and ate them. Now the dish looked like fish chowder. No one would realize.

To one side sat a crock holding four or five pieces of fried chicken.

“This ain’t doing nobody no good here.” She pulled the aluminum foil from the meatloaf pan and packed the chicken inside, closed the foil, and tucked it in her jacket pocket.

Martha decided to take a piece of pecan pie before she realized that it was in a disposable pie pan nobody would miss. Three pieces were left.

“That’s not much. I’ll just take it with me.”

Two more shelves were crammed with food in various and sundry containers. Martha turned up her nose at the burgoo, what her brother Floyd called “road-kill stew.” Her momma used to make it with lima beans, okra, and whatever meat Gid could shoot or trap—opossum, squirrel, ‘coon, even rattlesnake. She knew poor hill families who weren’t above using real road-kill if it was fresh.

“No telling what kind of meat’s in there,” Martha mumbled to herself.

She uncovered and poked her fingers in dish after dish, skipping only the crudité plates and vegetable salads.

“Corn pudding...one of my favorites. Ooh, baked beans.” She helped herself to good samplings of both before realizing that her stomach was rather full. She hadn’t even delved into the pies and cakes she saw on the lowest shelf. Quickly, she retrieved her pecan pie pan and filled the open half with a selection of desserts.

“For later.”

Martha re-packed the dishes into the refrigerator. They wouldn’t stack nicely, so she dumped them in higgledy-piggledy and slammed the door closed, making sure it didn’t pop back open. As an afterthought, she opened the freezer and found several varieties of ice cream. Unfortunately, she had no cooler or any way to carry that home in the heat.

“Oh well.”

Stacking the pie pan on top of her casserole dish, Martha made her way back to her Cadillac, being careful to shut the front door so no robbers would come in.

For Darlene, Tuesday morning came quickly enough. She’d had a lot of things to take care of on Monday, including taking her son to the dentist, buying groceries, and cooking some meals for the freezer so Zack would have something to eat when she was working. At twelve, he was old enough to look after himself a little more.

She invited him to come to the rectory and help with the painting project, but he whined, “Ah Mom. It’s summer. Do I have to?”

“No, I just thought you might enjoy yourself. There will be other kids—the Pugh twins and some others.”

“Oh, that’s cool, but my teeth hurt.”

Perhaps they did. Darlene didn't think he would refuse otherwise with Rhett and Riley coming. Zack idolized the twins and wanted to play football in high school just like them. Perhaps he was feeling shy. It's not like he'd ever talked to the two high schoolers in person.

"Okay, there's some leftover spaghetti in the fridge."

Rhett had told her that Riley and their friend Darius were coming and so was Amber and one or two of her girlfriends. Darlene would have liked at least one other competent adult, but her best painter, Arthur, was working at the church all day. Darlene hadn't considered asking Greta because she didn't know how to do that without getting her daughter in the bargain and she didn't want to face Joanne while she was trying to finish this job. Nobody had said anything to her since Saturday so maybe Joanne was keeping her secret. She could only hope it stayed that way. Darlene *really* didn't want the story to get back to Sylvia.

The kids all showed up at the rectory at once. Sylvia dropped off the three boys and one of the girl's mothers brought three girls, two of whom she recognized from Saturday. She hoped that she could contain the teenage hubris a little better this time. She planned to separate boys from girls, putting the girls outside on the kitchen cabinets and the boys inside on the hallway walls and the window and door trim. She'd go between groups to make sure things were moving along.

Throughout the morning, Darlene managed to keep her mind on the tasks at hand and avoid Rhett's questioning eyes and steamy stares. With an unending supply of sweet tea that Darlene had brought and a portable radio blaring Top 40 country tunes out of Lexington, the kids even kept themselves productively busy. By noon, the hallway walls were painted, almost all the trim was finished except for the hallway, and the cabinet doors had received a light sanding and a second coat of paint.

The girl's mother stopped by at twelve-fifteen to check on the kids and two of the girls left with her. Amber, who hadn't had much access to Riley all morning, opted to stick around. That left Darlene with Amber and the three boys to finish whatever could be finished that day based on how fast the paint dried. She set them to replacing electrical faceplates and removing masking tape while she slipped out to pick up lunch. It was the least she could do and Sylvia was sure to reimburse her from petty cash if she asked.

When Darlene returned, the group went outside to eat their Chick-fil-A combo meals at the picnic table. She enjoyed the way the three boys interacted, jostling each other and joking around. Darius clearly spent a lot of time with the Pugh twins and Darlene gathered that he was also on the high school football team. He was expected to be the starting quarterback for his senior year and the twins would be starting backs. A couple years younger than the boys, Amber didn't have

a lot to say about their favorite topic, but Riley made a point of including her in their conversation and jokes. Darlene got the impression that Riley was trying to make an impression, though she didn't see why, since the girl was obviously crazy about him.

The twins had worn different graphic t-shirts, so Darlene could tell which was which, though she thought she could tell them apart from the front now if they were near each other to compare. Riley's chin was maybe slightly longer and Rhett had more of a cowlick at the crown of his head...maybe.

At two-thirty, Sylvia came by to pick up the kids on her way home from work and see how things were coming along. She was impressed.

"Can you spare the kids?" Sylvia asked.

"Shoo-ah," Darlene replied. "If they don't go now, they'll have ta wait for me to finish up. Y'all just put your brushes and the roller in the bathroom sink and ah'll wash them before ah leave."

The teenagers did as they were asked and then headed noisily toward the front door, but Darlene noticed that Rhett hung back.

"I'll stay and help you clean up," he offered.

"Actually, Darlene," Sylvia responded, "that's a good idea. Riley can stay too. You shouldn't be here by yourself anyway. If you'll drop my boys at home, I'll take Darius and Amber home now."

"Uh...Mom," Riley interjected. "I told Amber I'd come over and play video games and stay for supper at her house."

Sylvia looked at her son in surprise. Was Riley *involved* with Sharon Young's daughter? Is that what Rhett meant when he said his brother recently had figured out where babies come from? Perhaps it was time for Sylvia to talk to Riley about the subject. For the moment, she merely asked, "Is your mom home this afternoon, Amber?"

"Yeah, Mrs. Pugh. She gets off work at four o'clock. I called her and she said Riley could come for supper."

"All right, then let's go. You can drop off Rhett?" she inquired of Darlene.

"Yeah, shoo-ah," Darlene replied, though it wasn't the dropping off part of the afternoon she was concerned about. She wasn't sure she was comfortable being alone at the rectory with Rhett after what had happened Saturday, but she couldn't very well say that.

"It shouldn't be too long. Zack's been alone all day and there's no tellin' what kind of trouble he'll have gotten into. Just leave the front door open on your way out, would you? It keeps the air movin' through he-ah." Darius nodded as he followed the others out.

"See you later, man," he called to Rhett.

“Later.”

Darlene immediately began giving directions. “Rhett, would you please start gatherin’ all the drop cloths and take them to the back yard? Ah’ll clean these brushes and then help you shake ‘em out.”

“Sure thing.”

As they worked on their separate tasks, Darlene began to get a little nervous. Already her mind was drifting ahead to being alone with Rhett in the close confines of her car. He was so appealing and obviously the opposite of shy when he was near her. It would be up to her, the adult, to prevent anything from happening—to make it clear that her behavior the other day was a mistake, an aberration that would not be repeated.

Darlene heard Rhett singing along with the radio as he moved about gathering the heavy canvas tarps and hauling them outside. When she had finished with the brushes, she set them in a paint tray to dry and then went down the hallway to see if the bedrooms were clear. She found Rhett in the master bedroom, dragging a tarp to the pile in the center of the floor. She could see that he intended to carry them in one heavy load, but it seemed to her like too much weight for one person. Darlene reached to pick up one of the tarps herself and when she stood, he was standing behind her...*close* behind her.

“Rhett...” she began, turning to face him, prepared to give him her speech. His laser green gaze caught her eyes and the words stuck in her throat. He grabbed her around the waist with one arm and pulled her toward him, still staring into her eyes.

Oh no! Darlene raised her hands to push him away, but when her palms contacted the hard curves of his pectoral muscles, she gasped, pausing just long enough for Rhett to discern that she didn’t want to push him away. He seized the moment as he had seen his father do innumerable times with his mother, wrapped his other arm around her waist and urged her closer. He leaned forward with the confidence of a man who knew his kiss wouldn’t be refused.

He’s only a kid! Darlene’s conscience screamed at her, but her body refused to listen. He didn’t feel like a kid. His heat surrounded her carrying the scent of sweat and the soap he’d used in the shower that morning...clean with a feral, musky undertone. She felt her heartbeat pound against her ribs as Rhett’s lips drew near. At the last moment, she turned her head to the side, but that didn’t deter him. He merely redirected his attention to the tender spot beneath the hinge of her jaw and kissed down her neck from there. Darlene couldn’t help tilting her head to the side in assent. When Rhett reached the base of her neck, he straightened and offered his lips to her again and this time she accepted. He pressed his advantage, thrusting his tongue forward until she parted her lips and surrendered, letting him dip deeply

into her mouth. Rhett's hands slid down to cup her buttocks and he pulled her to him until she could feel his erection against the front of her jeans.

"Ahh..." Darlene moaned softly, unable to contain her pleasure at this sensation which had been missing from her life for too long. She let her hands slide to the sexy muscles below his arms and downward to his tapering waist. Rhett lowered himself to the pile of tarps at their feet and pulled Darlene down on top of him. This young man was no virgin, Darlene realized. His movements were too confident, too slick. The knowledge didn't lessen her guilt, but made ignoring it a little easier.

Rhett began to explore her body with his hands, squeezing and stroking, while his tongue delved deeper into her mouth. Darlene couldn't stop herself from responding. He was so firm and curvy, so eager, so sweet. Sprawled awkwardly across the dirty tarpaulins, her mouth as hungry as his, Darlene slipped a hand beneath the youth's t-shirt and smoothed her palm across his pecs, over his nipples. Inhaling sharply, he matched and surpassed her, moving his hands under her t-shirt and around her back. He fumbled with the hooks on her bra for a few moments before yanking them roughly apart. It briefly crossed Darlene's mind that she should stop him, but she found no will to do so once his hands touched her bare breasts and fingered her nipples. She moaned into his mouth and allowed him to push her onto her back and roll on top of her. He eased her shirt and bra above her heavy breasts and leaned down to kiss a nipple.

"Suck..." she moaned and he obliged eagerly, squeezing and stroking her other breast before reaching down to fumble with the front of her jeans. Before long, Rhett had managed to unbutton and unzip them and slip one hand into the front of her panties, probing for her liquid-y center. When he pushed a finger inside her, Darlene writhed and moaned, the shock of the sensation erasing any niggling thoughts of right and wrong.

It was surprisingly liberating to accept this kind of pleasure from a younger man. She had no feelings of inadequacy, trepidation, or self-consciousness. It was obvious that he reveled in her body, most likely having never touched a grown-up woman before. Even with his inexpert fingers stroking her, Darlene felt her excitement mount, spurred on by his enthusiasm and her certainty that he would do whatever she asked. It didn't seem she would have to ask for much.

With both of them immersed in the excitement of their illicit tryst and the noise of the fan blowing in the hallway, it was no wonder they didn't hear the knocking at the screen door.

"Father? Are you here? Father?"

Since the front door was standing open, Martha did not hesitate to pull the screen door wide and step into the living room of the rectory. She realized

immediately that the priest had not yet moved in and that if he was there, he must be painting. She had wanted to return to the kitchen and poke through the contents of the refrigerator again. So much food just sitting there! Martha already had decided to take the ice cream home with her. After all, her car was air conditioned and she didn't have that far to drive. But having found the front door open, she had to investigate. Father hadn't responded to her calls. What if someone had broken in? A robber? Martha regretted that she didn't have her Daddy's pistol with her.

In case the robber was still in the house, Martha crept down the hallway quietly, peeking around doorframes before passing the doorways. So far, she'd found no one. She sidestepped the big fan and continued to the last room, the master bedroom. She stuck her head into the doorway and was stunned to the core of her soul.

"Oh my Lord!" Martha shrieked, pressing both hands to the sides of her face. "What is going on here?" Her shrill voice echoed through the empty house.

Darlene and Rhett jerked apart in surprise and Rhett scrambled to his knees, turning to face the intruder. Darlene lay on her back fully exposed, her breasts splayed to the sides, her t-shirt and bra bunched up above them. Her jeans were unzipped and her light brown pubic hair puffed out of the opening.

She hesitated for a second, uncertain which body parts to cover first as the old woman stared and continued to screech, "Oh my word! Oh my Lord! Father! Father!" Finally, Martha swiveled heavily and began clomping back through the hallway. "Father! Father!"

Rhett got to his feet and hurried after her as Darlene struggled to put her clothing in order. "M'am? M'am?" Rhett called. "Father Arthur's not here. M'am?"

The lumbering old woman was much too slow to get away if Rhett had wanted to catch her, but he didn't. He could see that she was scared and he merely wanted to calm her down and reassure her that everything was fine. He hoped she wouldn't call the church and report what she'd walked in on. No way would his mom not hear about that and he didn't want Darlene to get in trouble, especially since it was all his fault.

When it became obvious that the old lady was frightened and wanted to get away, Rhett let her go, latching the front door behind her. *Talk about closing the barn door after the cows have escaped! Or rather cow...singular*, he thought wryly. He didn't know the blonde-haired lady and wondered if Darlene did. He turned and hurried back down the hallway to the master bedroom.

"Are you all right?" he asked Darlene.

"Yeah, fahn," she replied as she patted her hair, having straightened and secured her clothing.

“Do you know her?”

“Yeah, your mom tol’ me she’s a crazy ol’ lady from the church. Ah almost didn’t reco’nize her with that Dolly-Parton-lookin’ wig. She was wearin’ black ponytails when she was here on Satu’day. Ah thought she saw us kissin’ then ‘cause she did the same thing, dashin’ out o’ the house hollerin’ ‘bout shameful things goin’ on. Ah never heard nothin’ more about it, though, so ah don’t know.”

“Crap! We should have shut the door.”

“We shouldna been *doin’* nothin’,” Darlene countered. “It’s mah fault. Ah shouldna let this happen.”

“No, don’t say that.” Rhett moved toward Darlene with open arms. She backed away and dropped her forehead into her hand.

“Dang it.”

Rhett ignored her resistance and wrapped his arms around her in a hug. “So she knows my mom, huh?”

Darlene nodded against Rhett’s shoulder, disgusted at herself for taking comfort in the arms of the youth she was endangering, but she couldn’t help it. He was just so *male*. Not like a kid at all.

“Your mom said she’s always goin’ on about somethin’ and nobody pays any attention to what she says.”

“I hope that’s true.” Rhett chuckled.

“How can you laugh? This is *terrible*.” She looked into his youthful face. “You’re not eighteen are you?” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Just turned seventeen. Does that matter?”

“It maht to the law.”

Rhett smiled, a twinkle in his eyes. “I won’t tell if you don’t.”

Darlene shook her head. “Ah’m sorry, Rhett. Ah don’t know what’s got into me.” She pushed away from him and bent to pick up a tarp. “Let’s get these outside and shook off, then ah’ll take you home.”

“I’d rather stay here with you.”

She shot him a grim look. “Help,” she ordered.

Rhett leaned over and grabbed the entire pile of tarps, then headed toward the sliding glass door to the backyard. Darlene set the hallway fan aside so he could pass and then followed him outside. Rhett dropped the three tarps onto the larger pile in the grass and raised his hand to scratch his nose.

Whew! he thought as he caught the scent of Darlene on his fingers. He glanced down as the front of his jeans tightened and when he looked up, Darlene was watching him. He blushed.

“Ah’m sorry,” she repeated, flushing. “Let’s shake these out.”

Darlene pulled at one tarp and Rhett helped untangle it from the pile. They flapped it in the air like a sheet, then folded it by walking toward each other repeatedly and matching its corners until the canvas was reduced to a two-by-two-foot square. After flopping it to the ground, they repeated the process nine more times, creating two stacks of tarps each one foot high. The stacks were too heavy for Darlene to carry so she escorted Rhett as he picked up the first one and carried it around the house to her car.

“These belong to the church,” she remarked, opening the hatchback of her old Subaru.

“So when are we coming back to finish this project?” he inquired.

“Ah’ll be back Thursday mornin’, but it’s not a good idea for you to be he-ah.”

“I’ll get Riley to come with me. You need some tall help,” he declared with an impish smile.

“Ah don’ know, Rhett. Let’s just lock up and git out o’ he-ah.”

Rhett returned for the second stack of tarps while Darlene locked the back door of the house and joined him at the car. They rode in silence until Darlene pulled up and stopped the car at the curb in front of his house.

“See you Thursday, nine o’clock?” Rhett verified with a smile.

Darlene scowled at him. He leaned across the seat and gave her a quick peck on the lips.

“Rhett!” she hissed and he smiled broadly, flashing all his teeth.

She raised a fist, but before she could punch him, Rhett exited the car and shut the door behind him. As he loped away, Darlene observed the way his knees and hips moved in loose synchronization to propel him across the front yard. He scaled the three porch steps in one easy leap and slapped the lintel above his head before he landed and crossed to the front door. He turned and lifted his hand in farewell as he disappeared into the house.