A Shot in the Dark
by Wendy Hinsey

I woke up in the middle of the night to a scream. Leaping up, I snatched my pistol from a
drawer and cautiously made my way through the house, looking for any small movement or any
slight sound. Shadows raced across the wall as beams of light emanated from inside the living
room. Creeping toward the doorway, I peered through. As I glanced around, I saw a small
shadowy figure rush at me. Instinctually, I fired two shots. Half a second too late, I realized my
misconception. The noise of the gunshots made my ears ring like bells from hell as I struggled
to wrap my mind around what had just transpired. Dropping the gun, and turning on the light, I
ran to the small figure of my son on the floor. He was bleeding profusely, and I could clearly see
the damage I had done. Was there any way he would survive this?

I grabbed my phone and ran back to Thomas. He was moaning and crying, all but dead. As I
dialed 911, I stopped suddenly as there was an abrupt and complete stillness in the room. I was
too late, so I just hugged and rocked a feeble and lifeless Thomas to my chest.

“No! Thomas No!” I shrieked as I jumped from my slumber, knocking over an empty glass. I
sighed. Not again, I thought. My sheets and clothes were saturated in sweat just as they had
been the previous four nights. It was that same nightmare. The one that made me wish for a
sleepless night. I crawled out of bed and walked to the bathroom. Time to wake Thomas for
school.

At breakfast, we both sat in silence, as usual. No small talk, no interesting discussions, and
no funny stories. I suppose since my wife, Temperance, died 8 months ago, things would never
be the same. She was the life of this house. For a twelve year old to lose his mother must be
devastating, and that’s an understatement considering the nature of her death. After a time, I
stood and said, “Thomas you should get ready for school before you’re late.”

“Oh, alright,” he mumbled more to himself than to me. I watched him as he left the room. He
was never what one would call a bright or happy child even when Temperance was alive. But
now he failed every class even though he came straight home from school with a pile of books in
his hand and spent almost every night in his room alone, reading. Well, at least he had his
health. In fact, I couldn’t think of a single instance in which he missed school because of an
illness. Maybe Temperance had just handled that end. I always took some pride in the fact that
my son towered above most other boys his age. He was not only taller, but stronger, and very
tough. Once, when he was seven, he took a bad fall on his bike. When he hit the pavement, I gasped because his leg twisted quite unnaturally. It was one of the rare times I was present, and I thought for sure we would be heading to the emergency room, but he just calmly picked himself up and dusted himself off.

When I saw Thomas leave for school, I headed to work. My new partner, Jon, greeted me at the station and smiled. “Hey Marcus! We should have taken the night shift. A very interesting case opened up.” I always felt a twinge of jealousy toward Jon. He came from a long line of detectives. His dad and even grandpa were still legends in these parts. I had a vague memory of reading an article about his dad in detective school. He had been on a serial murder case twenty years ago involving at least four women, and he had been part of the pivotal research involved in stereotyping serial murderers—white, middle class, abusive childhood, intelligent men who could easily blend into society, yet had trouble with intimate relationships. I knew I should respect that, but it seemed that Jon had been handed everything on a silver platter, riding on the coattails of his father, while I had struggled my entire life with an abusive father, an absent mother, and a childhood of dark memories that I never shared with anyone. So everything I accomplished required pure steadfast determination.

Jon continued, “A man found his wife dead in their bed. He just woke up and found her that way. Swears he didn’t hear a thing. When he rolled her over, he saw that she had a huge gash from her heart to her intestines. When they brought him in, he kept muttering, “The look on her face… pure fear…terror…oh my God…her eyes were frozen in fear.” Jon continued with more details, but I wasn’t listening anymore. I already knew the rest. After letting my partner rant for several minutes, I asked, “Was it possible the husband did this?” His quick reply didn’t shock me. “She had put up a brief struggle, but none of his DNA was found under her nails. He didn’t even have a spot of blood on him. There was absolutely no evidence of cleanup, and he passed a polygraph test. There was no life insurance, no mistress, no motive.”

I had hoped that this murder would help me find my wife’s murderer, but it seemed to provide no more evidence. Finally, deciding I couldn’t find out anything more sitting here, I said, “Can I speak to him?” Jon led the way and then disappeared.

As I stepped into the room, the gentleman gave me a quick nod. When he showed me a picture of his wife, Angeline, I gasped. She closely resembled my wife. The same beautifully shaped face with the same compassionate expression in her eyes. Her hair and eye color were
different, but overall, it was a close match. The room was closing in on me, my hands were trembling uncontrollably, and despite the frigid room, a cold sweat dampened the back of my shirt. I simply had to leave. Running into Jon in the doorway, I told him I would be going home for the day.

“But, you just got here!” Jon blurted.

“Sick…feel really sick…” was all I could manage to say.

“Wow dude, you do look terrible. You should take something. Hope it’s not contagious.” I was going to take something alright. A few, or maybe more than a few stiff drinks…

“But isn’t this case absolutely creepy?” said Jon. “Did you see pictures of the murder scene? I tell you, I have never seen a man more rattled…” I was beginning to become more than a little disgusted at my partner’s enthusiasm for this crime.

Then, I reminded myself that Jon was new at this, and besides, he didn’t know the details of my wife’s case. Sometimes homicide detectives need to distance themselves in this way, or they will go completely mad. When I was younger, I used to talk to Temperance about the nightmarish details of my job. She always listened earnestly. Then, it became too difficult to even talk about, and Temperance and I pretty much stopped talking altogether. And after Thomas came along, she was always preoccupied with him. So, we went through the motions of being married. And, more often than not, I turned to the bottle as my only solace. That is, until about 2 years ago when a strange and sudden change occurred in Temperance. She came home one day and announced that we were going to change our family. We were going to eat dinner together. We were going to have family game night. And, we were going to go to church.

At first, it was rather amusing and cute the way Temperance would have a theme like “Boardwalk Burgers” for Monopoly night. Thomas, a dutiful even if somewhat reluctant child, solemnly played the games and ate the food, as did I. Church, however, was another thing. Sunday was my only day to relax. I didn’t have time for religion. But, Temperance would have my clothes pressed and ready when she gently nudged me awake with Sunday coffee, so I could hardly deny her this small concession. But Thomas was another story. Every Sunday was a battle, as he made every excuse not to go to church. Complaining that he was ill, however, did not fly with Temperance. Thomas was never sick, and he wouldn’t start being sick just on Sundays now. Looking back, acting or not, the only time I ever even saw Thomas look ill was on church days. Temperance was always patient yet steadfast. “Just give it time Thomas,”
she would say. “We should have been taking you all along. Just give it time.” Temperance and I did not believe in spanking our child, yet there were some Sundays when I felt he needed a belt on his behind. This continued every Sunday for over a year. And Thomas only got worse. Since my wife’s funeral, not once had we gone to church or even talked about it -- which was fine with me.

Snapping back to my present reality, with my brain just about on overload, I headed home for a drink and a nap. I made a mental note to myself to feed the dog. I had to remind myself of a lot of things since Temperance died. We had not had much luck with dogs, this being our fifth dog since Thomas was born. Temperance always took it hard, but Thomas was so used to it, I guess he thought it was normal. After feeding the dog, I fixed a drink and sat down to watch TV. Right in the middle of a commercial, a loud scream came from the hallway. I jumped up, quickly walked toward the noise, and nearly fainted at the sight. There, standing in the dimly lit hallway was my wife, Temperance. Although she was dead – I knew she was dead, she did not look terrifying or supernatural. It was my lovely Temperance just as she had been in life. I wanted to reach out and stroke her soft hair, feel her plump lips on mine. But, her blue eyes were fixed on me as if they were looking into my very soul. And within those eyes emerged deep sorrow and an imploring demeanor. Then she spoke.

“Marcus, you must not do it. You must stop this!”

“Stop what?” I said. What must I stop?”

“You must stop this evil. My son, my son… please don’t hurt my son.”

“What evil? And what about OUR son? What do you mean? I couldn’t hurt him. I am his dad, his dad!

Dad?

Dad!

On the third dad, I sat upright on the couch to see Thomas yelling at me to wake up. It was a little after four. After disposing of the empty scotch bottle, I went to clean up before I made dinner, and when I came downstairs, Thomas was nowhere to be found. I looked in his room, but it was empty. As I was leaving, a stack of books in the corner caught my eye. Slowly, I walked toward them. Were my eyes deceiving me? The book on the top of the stack was Satan: a biography. Underneath were The Satanic Rituals and How to Cast out Demons: A Simple Guide, and finally, Deliverance from Demons. Disbelief, shock, and utter despair made my head
spin uncontrollably. I dropped the books as if simply touching them would have an effect on me. I stumbled out of his room, my mind wandering from one title to another – How to Cast Out Demons… Deliverance from Demons… I was about to go lie down, for my head had begun throbbing, when I caught a glimpse of Thomas outside in the backyard. He was sitting in the back petting our dog. How could he look so innocent with all those books just sitting in his room? I needed a drink. Stumbling back to the window, I watched Thomas. He began smiling just slightly. Then, his hands moved slowly up toward the dog’s head, and with a sudden jerk, he broke its neck. I watched, completely dumbfounded as he kicked the dog aside like a used toy before heading toward the house. Before I knew what I was doing, I had grabbed a bottle of scotch and was in the bedroom with a gun in my hand. Shaking and sweating, tears were rolling like a flood down my face. As I sat there wondering, “What is wrong with my son?” I noticed the corner of a box was sticking out from under the bed. I pulled out the box and opened it. Inside were newspaper clippings, some as old as twenty years. Also, there was some scratch paper with Temperance’s handwriting. All of the articles featured reports of murdered women. The pictures of the murdered women created a centrifuge of bewilderment within my terror-stricken reality as I finally reached the conclusion that every single murdered woman closely resembled my wife. Then, I looked at the picture of the detective on one of the cases from 20 years ago, and I swear right then I nearly passed out as my heart began to beat like the feathers of a bird caged for the first time. It was Jon, my partner. I don’t mean it looked like Jon; I mean it was Jon. And, he hadn’t aged a day in 20 years. Then I noticed something else. His beady eyes and large chin made him look like an older version of Thomas. Before I could finish my thought, Thomas threw open the door. Dad? Dad? Dad!

I jumped from my fitful nightmare not entirely sure where I was or what was even real. I looked Thomas in the eye. He looked nothing like me. He really didn’t look much like his mother either. Why hadn’t I seen this before? About 13 years ago, Temperance and I had a very rough patch. I always had a nagging feeling that something about Thomas was not right. Thomas was big and strong. Like my father always told me, I was a wimp – “a pansy wussy little faggot.” Thomas wasn’t afraid of the dark. He didn’t wet his pants when the lights were turned out. He was NOT my child.
“Dad,” said Thomas. I thought you were going to make dinner. He had a slight smirk on his face. “And I thought you refused to come into this room anymore since mom…” His voice trailed off. I looked down at the foot of the bed and saw a box. It was unopened. Just exactly what was happening to me? I had to check on the dog. Running to the window, Holley was nowhere to be found. “Where is Holley, Thomas? Where is she?!”

“I don’t know Dad! What is wrong with you?”

“Where is the Goddamn dog Thomas?!” Coming toward the window, Thomas pointed to the far end of the yard. “She’s right there Dad, sleeping in a cool spot under that tree.” And there she was, looking peaceful and still, but too still! “Why isn’t she moving?” Looking up, I saw the same look in his eyes now as when he had killed Holley. I knew I had to save myself. I quickly ran back to the bedroom and got my gun, slamming the door behind me. The unopened box lay beckoning. Upon opening it, I was immediately drawn to Temperance’s handwriting. The first thing I read was, “We must save our family. We must go to church. God is the only way. My son’s father is…” Before I had time to read more, Thomas burst into the room. He had a cell phone in his hand, and he had clearly called someone.

“Dad? What are you doing Dad?”

“Get away from me,” I said. “Step away.”

“But Dad…”

He stepped closer and I shot him in the leg. He was moaning and crying as I ran from the room wanting nothing more than to just get out of this hell. When I got to the front door, Jon, my partner, burst through before I could open it. His gun was pointing at me and mine at him. “Put down the gun Marcus. Put down the gun and we can figure this all out.”

Then, I saw that look in his eye. The same one Thomas had before he killed our dog. Before I could raise my gun, he shot me in the stomach. I looked up and saw Thomas stumbling down the hallway. When he reached me, with Jon behind me still holding his weapon, he said, “Dad? Dad!” I couldn’t help but wonder just who Thomas was talking to…Then, as the life faded from me, I saw the darkness – the darkness of my childhood closets, the darkness of my soul, the darkness which was now my eternity…