

## Bliss

Time: the Present

She was not totally surprised when federal and state agents showed up on their doorstep that beautiful May morning in 2009. True, she was eighty-five years old, although a very vigorous eighty-five; she had not been active for nearly fifty years; and she had been a model citizen with her fantastic husband for almost that long. Their daughter Ann and their son Chris were probably planning a golden anniversary party for her and Travis next year, but she supposed that would have to be canceled. After all, there is no statute of limitations on murder, and, in the 1950s, she had not considered that DNA from hair follicles, bits of skin, or body fluids could be important. Frances Bliss McFarland, nee Steele, knew her days of freedom were numbered.

She and her husband Travis had been just ready to go out the door for a fast three-mile walk when the agents showed up. Both were in excellent health and well conditioned for their early to mid-eighties, actually probably for people twenty years younger. They even still enjoyed their romps in the hay as much as ever although not as frequently as in their earlier days, and she still thought Travis was the most-wonderful and sexiest man she had ever known.

After producing multiple proofs of identification, one of the agents addressed her, “Mrs. McFarland, we need to ask you some questions. We don’t have a warrant; so, you may refuse if you wish, and you may talk to a lawyer or have a lawyer present if you wish.”

“I know my Miranda rights,” she said. “I’ll talk to you, but I want Travis to be present so that he knows what you are doing.”

“That’s up to you. There may be questions that could make you or him uncomfortable.”

She thought a moment before saying, “Any secrets Travis doesn’t know are not because I’ve tried to hide anything. They are because I didn’t want to implicate him in any crime.” Travis knew everything, of course, but she would never admit to them that he had knowledge of any crime.

The McFarlands took the agents to their den and asked if they wanted tea, coffee, diet cola, or, perhaps, ale (“sorry, all we have!”), all of which were turned down. Fran asked, “While I’m interviewed, should I use your surnames, or do you want to be Tom, Rick, and Sally? We’re just Fran and Travis and can wait for the prosecutors and opposing attorneys to put other handles on us.”

“First names are fine with us,” Rick said. Fran and Travis were dressed in walking shoes, shorts, and tees, and he asked, “Do you want to change into other clothes?”

“We dress like this most of the time. We’re comfortable, if our eighty-year-old bodies don’t bother you,” Travis responded, and the agents all said Travis’s and Fran’s attire was completely satisfactory.

Sally started the questioning, “Fran, do the deaths of Tony Cruze, James Meyer, Thomas Parker, and Gabe Tenant mean anything to you? These were all in the late 1950s, at least a half century ago, and you may not remember the men. Another question. Obviously, your name is Bliss, but does ‘one night of Bliss’ have any special meaning?”

Fran replied, “My memory is still excellent, Sally. I’ll make you a deal. Tell me what you know, and I’ll be completely truthful in my answers with no evasion, but I’m not going to sit here and start confessing to a bunch of stuff until you give me some facts.”

Sally nodded to Tom, who said, “We have DNA evidence tying you to these deaths and others, plus there are still several being looked into. We just recently came upon the ‘one night of Bliss’ clue, which ties in to your name. And some of us are federal because one of those men was under the witness-protection program, but any prosecution would be by the state.”

“It all connects, true,” Fran said. “Those four were all multi-murderers who couldn’t be convicted for one or another reason. Yes, I took them out. And I remember James Meyer, the witness-protection fellow, who was one of the worst. I’ll give you what I remember.” She thought of the past and how it had all begun.

### The Early Years

Fran, then known as Frannie, lost her parents when she was about five. She could barely remember them before they were killed in a shootout between two rival mobs in downstate Illinois. The mobsters were probably from Chicago trying to keep a lower profile in a smaller town, but each learned of the other’s presence, and a pitched battle erupted. Frannie’s parents, who were innocent bystanders, were the only recorded casualties of the battle. After their deaths, she was shuffled from one orphanage to another in those bleak years of the great depression until, finally, at age ten, she was claimed by her mother’s brother, Rudy Baum, who was himself only nineteen. There was no red tape involved in the transfer of authority, once he proved he was her uncle. After that, she never had much formal education, but she used the library and read and studied everything from medieval literature to the physics of relativity because she wanted to get her mind around everything.

Rudy worked for an oriental gardener, Chung, who, at that time, was not feeling too much pinch from the depression because he took care of several large monied estates. Rudy liked his work and his employer and rented a spare room in the employer’s small house. Because of Rudy’s need to control his anger, Chung began teaching him some of the techniques of mental and physical discipline that he had himself mastered as a student of subak many years ago before coming to the United States. In truth, he was one of the greatest masters of subak but had never let that be known here in the States because he had been told it might get him in trouble. After Frannie came to live with Rudy, Chung included her in the training, and she proved an apt pupil. Although he did learn some mental discipline, Rudy never advanced far in the training; however, Frannie mastered it all and advanced into the precise control of one’s body and, finally, into the

use of the unarmed body as a fighting machine. By the time she had become a well-honed fighter, capable of going hand to hand against an armed mob, Frannie had so absorbed subak's code of honor and justice that she was not capable of using her training to hurt anyone unless it was absolutely forced upon her.

Rudy loved his niece, but he loved her both as his sister's daughter and as a woman, well girl. When Frannie was not quite fifteen, he introduced her to sex, and their coupling lasted for the rest of his life. Although he never forced her in any way, he surely seduced her, but it was not until several years later that Frannie considered what he had done to be wrong. Even then, she didn't consider the uncle-niece part wrong, but she understood that he had taken advantage of her immaturity even though she was a willing participant.

World War Two intruded, and Rudy was called away for military duty. Frannie, left alone, was able to do enough work for Chung to pay for her room and board, and, indeed, Chung would have let her stay without charge because he thought of Frannie as a replacement for the Korea-born granddaughter whom he never got to know. Having been introduced to sex so early and missing what she had enjoyed with Rudy, Frannie had sex a few times with boys who worked part-time for Chung, and one of these sessions got out of hand when two other boys joined the first one. She had no one to talk with about her problems except Chung and brought it up with him. He didn't condemn her for wanting or having sex, but he suggested that she could use the discipline of subak on her sexual desire also if she wished. There were no more boys.

The first time she ever used her discipline training in self defense was when a group of five young thugs accused her of being a 'Jap lover,' implying that Chung was disloyal to the country. She attempted to walk on past them, but they got in her way and pushed her into an alley. Even then, she tried to get them to let her go, but one of the toughs said, "Get the little slut's panties down," and one of the others starting trying to do so. She might even have let them have sex with her to prevent violence, although it was against her will, but two of the thugs grabbed her arms to twist them up behind her back, and almost without thinking, she went into action, first relaxing totally, then using her supposedly immobile arms to bring the thugs' heads together violently. At the same time, a foot broke another's leg. Of the final two, one had got a knife out, and he lost the use of that hand forever, while the other suffered only a light blow to the solar plexus, that had him vomiting over the other four. It was some time before the five young toughs could crawl, walk, or be helped from the alley, and, although Frannie walked away from the incident without physical harm, by the time she reached home, she was nauseated and threw up the remnants of the last meal she had eaten. Over the years she was to learn that she could not use her training to cause violence to others without extreme discomfort to herself.

When Rudy returned from the war, he and Frannie began their life together again. Rudy insisted on moving to the west coast; so, Frannie reluctantly bade goodbye to Chung and journeyed forth with Rudy. She was now twenty-one, with almost no formal education, but learned in literature, math, physics, and history. She loved Shakespeare, Poe, Mark Twain, James Fenimore Cooper, Steinbeck, and two little-known authors of science fiction, Asimov and Heinlein. She had taught

herself calculus so that she could understand an article she read in a science magazine, and she had a fair understanding of relativity, special relativity, at least. Although she didn't realize it, she knew more about the constitution and its background than most college graduates. She would have liked to be a teacher but took a job instead as a clerk in a private-investigator's office, not a shadowy Phillip Marlowe private eye, but a major operation. She soon found that her deductive abilities exceeded those of most of the people at the agency, but she didn't try to change her status.

Frannie and Rudy picked up their sex lives where they had stopped, but it was never quite satisfying for Frannie. Earlier, just the excitement of sex had been enough, but Rudy was not a great lover and refused to allow Frannie to spice up the action by putting into practice what she had learned from reading. She was also coming to resent that he had seduced her at such an early age, although she admitted that she would have hated to miss the sex in those years.

Rudy found work easily in the post-war economy but changed jobs frequently. At one point, he was moonlighting with a small-time hoodlum on some deal that didn't quite pan out because of someone else's failure. Rudy had been promised a great deal of money but got none, not even his fair share of the profits that were recovered. When Rudy complained bitterly, the hoodlum boss had a gang member stick a knife in him. Rudy reached home, where he died in Frannie's arms while telling her what had happened.

That hoodlum was the first person Frannie ever killed. The police never even investigated Rudy's murder; so, justice was up to her. She could have easily killed the man with her bare hands or bare feet; however, she could not force herself to do so because that would be a violation of her code of honor. That it was against the law didn't bother her, and the act of killing him didn't bother her. So, she devised a plan. She knew from her extensive reading of a poison from a plant that was readily available. She just needed to get to the hoodlum when he was vulnerable, and, to prepare, she decided to play private eye. Having learned from her snooping that the hoodlum used a local madam to supply him with any new woman on her staff, she applied to the madam using a false identity and was accepted as one of her prostitutes. It didn't bother Frannie that she had to be with a few other tricks before her appointment with the hoodlum, but, although she had hoped to get a bit of sexual relief from those encounters, it didn't happen. After only a week or so, she was on her way to visit the hoodlum. She was searched, but no one paid much attention to her bottles of lubricant, one of them supposedly a special body lotion. She gave the man a rollicking night of sex and had a few orgasms herself, mostly, she suspected, from thinking that the man on top of her would soon be dead by her hand. She left several scratches on him, and, as the night wore on, she rubbed the 'special body lotion' on the scratches. She even got some in his eyes as he napped. She knew it wouldn't cause pain to his eyes because it created numbness. For a finale, she rode him, not even stopping when she climaxed but continuing until she could tell the poison was taking effect.

"You just enjoyed one night of Bliss," she stated calmly. "It's the only one you'll ever get. Just so you know, you are dying for Rudy. Remember Rudy Baum. Thanks for the sex. Bye, forever."

She got off him, and began dressing. He tried to get up, but she shoved him back to the bed. He attempted to call for help, but she held her hand over his mouth and said, “Sssh. Don’t bother people. I’ll see myself out.”

She walked calmly out of the bedroom and past his guards or henchmen. She wasn’t worried; she didn’t even care if they killed her; she had done her job. She returned home and never went back to the madam’s place. Her code of honor was intact; killing the hoodlum didn’t bother her at all. The police didn’t try hard to solve the murder, and, even if they had questioned Frannie, she looked completely different in her role as detective-agency clerk from how she had appeared as the whore who took the small-time hoodlum’s life.

### The Present

Tom said, “You’ll probably never be prosecuted for that first killing. Actually, you’ll probably face charges only on the Meyer case, the guy in the witness program. As you said, he deserved to die, and I think he double-crossed the prosecution on the witness program, anyhow. We three are fairly sure he committed the crime the guy he testified against paid for. Not that the other guy was an angel.”

Rick put in, “Anyhow, I don’t think you need worry about the others except Meyer and really shouldn’t have to worry about that one because he deserved to die, but that’s my personal opinion, not official. Travis, we did a background check on you, too, and it seems you’ve been a model citizen all your life, but you have a brother Trevor McFarland, who is still wanted on a murder charge from nearly fifty years ago. Again, be aware of Miranda, but do you know his whereabouts since that time?”

It was Fran who volunteered, “Actually, I have known his exact whereabouts for nearly fifty years. It may come as a surprise to Travis.” It would not be a surprise to Travis, but she would never implicate him in this, but, if she told the truth about herself, a few lies to help Travis would comply with her code of honor. She thought back to the end of her life as a professional killer or, as she preferred to think of it, the beginning of her life with Travis.

### October 1959

“From whom did you get my name?” Frances Bliss Steele asked the middle-aged man, Mr. Gonzalez, who sat across the desk from her in her private investigator’s office. He mentioned a name which included a code that meant she should be able to trust him. Although she ran a legitimate detective agency, she also performed special services for trusted clients who could persuade her that the need for that service was valid.

“You know the requirements,” Fran said. “It’s one million dollars, cash, plus expenses. And you have to convince me beyond a doubt that the person is guilty and maliciously evil. My requirements are

higher than those of a jury because I become executioner as well if I accept the case. I can turn you down now, and, if I find myself believing the person is not as represented, I can stop at any time and refund your money, including expenses. If I ever find a client lies to me to get my help, that client dies, and, if I have already taken the person out, the client dies in the most painful way I can make it happen, and I'd probably have to kill myself too after that. Do you still want me?" Fran always charged a million dollars for these special cases, but, sometimes, it ended up that an anonymous donor, actually she, supplied the million or a part of the million.

"Yes," he said. "This man is guilty. Trevor McFarland. He's caused several deaths, but I want him for only one, my daughter Maria's death. He got her to have sex with him, actually become infatuated with him, and, then, he let a pack of animals have her and kill her. They killed her, but he was responsible, and it's not the first time he's done this."

Fran interrupted, "Before we start. Are you doing this partly because you feel guilty for not welcoming your daughter back after you thought she was a fallen woman?"

He thought a while and hung his head before saying, "Probably. although her mother and I did try to get her to come back. She would do anything McFarland asked, and, when the police paid them a visit, she said she was with him willingly."

"Okay, let's see what you have on Trevor McFarland." As the man presented the story, it was clear that McFarland was evil if he was guilty as accused, and, it seemed the police had almost but not quite enough evidence to prosecute him for this crime, as for several others. A few times, he had even been arrested and brought to trial, but the evidence was never quite enough to convince a jury beyond reasonable doubt. He had even persuaded his brother's wife Shirley to abandon her husband for him and, apparently, had gotten her involved in a kidnap scheme that had gone awry. It appeared that Shirley had violated the kidnap victim, a girl of fourteen, vaginally and anally with a large dildo. The girl died of the injuries, and Shirley killed herself instead of facing arrest and prosecution. Shirley's husband Travis McFarland insisted that Shirley would never commit this evil act and that his brother Trevor was responsible for both deaths; however, there was no semen or other direct evidence to connect Trevor to the crimes. His fingerprints were in the apartment, but he admitted that he visited Shirley there often for sex.

"I've had another detective agency do part of the work for you," the client said. "Trevor McFarland is now — or rather was — under surveillance by both the feds for ties to an interstate prostitution ring and by the mob for cheating them out of a large chunk of money. The mob may kill him, but that's not satisfactory; I want him to know I had it done. If you need to, you can even set me up as the killer because I don't mind being prosecuted or even dying for the killing. He's slipped surveillance but will be in Memphis at a car show all next week, and he has a call girl on tap for the entire week, apparently just one. Does that help?"

Fran responded, "By putting a little money in the right place, I can be that call girl, but, from what you have on him, I would have expected him to have a different woman every day. I'll give

him the best and the last sex he ever has, one night of Bliss.” This was her signature, a night of hot sex and the man woke up dead, actually dying with Fran explaining the reason for his death. She knew she would soon have to give up the special-service aspect of her agency because she was beginning to get too much pleasure from what she was doing. Usually, she would be having sex as she told the man why he was dying, and she would almost always have an orgasm as he wilted away. Thank goodness, she could still have an orgasm from straight sex, but this was getting too kinky. Well, money-wise, it didn’t matter because her straight detective work would provide a decent living; she never used the money from special cases for herself and always tried to funnel most of the extra millions she received into efforts to help people harmed by the creeps she removed from the land of the living.

Fran subcontracted with a Memphis investigator to begin work on the case, and, after some research, he reported back that it wouldn’t be possible to insert Fran as McFarland’s call girl because he had asked for one specific woman. A bit more work revealed that this woman was Yolanda, a professional killer like Fran, but one who did the job without questions about the person to be killed. And Trevor McFarland had connections to this prostitution ring. ‘Stranger and stranger,’ Fran thought. ‘Was McFarland arranging to have himself offed? Or was the leader of the ring working with someone else without McFarland’s knowledge? Or was McFarland using this woman to protect him?’ She decided that it was not likely the latter because she knew Yolanda was not particularly good; a couple of bruisers could take her out. Fran knew that, if she continued her work, she would eventually have to kill Yolanda, but that was something she dreaded because she wasn’t sure the woman was really malicious; she just did anything necessary to survive.

Fran flew in to Memphis several days early with a stash of cash and discovered that it was still muggy in October. Finding that the hotel for which McFarland had reservations had some air-conditioned suites, she booked one for the week. Not too long after arriving, she managed to locate the other female killer, who was also doing surveillance, and approached her quietly. “I’m Bliss. I’d recommend that you get lost without talking to anyone. Would twenty-five gees in cash help you do that?”

Yolanda had heard of Bliss and, apparently, knew her underground reputation because she was unable to control the shaking in her hand or the quiver in her voice as she reached for the offered cash and said, “Okay, I will,” as she nodded her head. She left immediately, and Fran tracked her to the Greyhound station, where she purchased a ticket to Los Angeles. A man had followed also, and Fran waited to be sure he didn’t get on the bus also.

Just before the bus pulled out, Fran walked by the woman and said softly, “A man watched. I’d leave the bus before it gets to its destination even if you get on another to the same place.” As the bus pulled away, Fran made her way back to the hotel, followed by the man. Ah, maybe she was the one he was tailing.

When Trevor McFarland showed up at the hotel, Fran approached him in the elevator as he went to his room. “The woman you requested had to leave because of family problem,” she told him. “I’m Fran. I can do anything she can and can do it better.” He appeared about her age, thirty five, possibly a year or so younger or a year or so older. He was good looking but no Adonis, about five-ten, one sixty-five, brown hair, hazel eyes. His eyes were not the eyes of a killer, but, what the hell, Fran’s eyes were not the eyes of a killer either. So, she decided she should strike that.

“I’m not asking you to do anything,” McFarland told her. “Just stay by my side most of the time, and I suppose you will need to sleep in my room, but you don’t have to sleep in my bed. I’m booked here all week, but we should just need Monday and Tuesday.” Fran knew that Trevor McFarland was supposedly able to win the heart of any female, but she normally kept her mind separate from her heart. Her mind was telling her that this man could not be evil, and her heart was telling her that something or somebody had really hurt him deeply. She moved her clothes from her suite to his and settled in.

She told him, “You’re setting the tone here, Trevor. I’ll do whatever you want. Should I cover up or come out naked after a shower? Whenever you want me in your bed, just say so.”

After a while, he said to her, “You should probably cover up. You’re beautiful and a pretty-exciting woman, you know, and you would certainly get me excited if you ran around without any clothes on.” He paused, then said, “Fran, you are not a federal agent, and I don’t think you are from the mob. Who are you? What did you do with Yolanda? You are from my brother, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean, Trevor? Your brother Travis? Why would he have someone guarding you?” she asked him.

“You know quite well that I’m not Trevor. I’m Travis. You know we’re identical twins,” he said. Actually, she hadn’t known they were identical twins, just that Travis had been Shirley’s husband. Damn, she had done some sloppy detective work, and that was not acceptable on these rub-out cases. The man continued, “People know Trevor likes powerful cars. He promised that if I would come for this show and book as him that he would go to the state attorney general to clear Shirley. He hired the prostitute to be with me because he said he wouldn’t be here without a woman. His lawyer is supposed to have made a deal for him to not get much prison time. I assume you are here to make sure I don’t spill the beans to the feds or the mob, both of whom are out there watching me.”

Fran went over to him and put an arm around him. “I didn’t tell you quite the truth either. You could tell this to the feds or the mob and get me in big trouble, but I don’t think you will. Everything about you says that you are a good person, if I can read people. Have you ever heard of Bliss? That’s me.” At his head shake, she continued, “Well, most decent people probably haven’t, but I suspect Trevor has. The woman who was supposed to be with you was probably going to kill you; I don’t know whether she was supposed to kill Trevor or Travis, and she

probably didn't care. I gave her a bundle of money and sent her on her way because I thought you were Trevor, and I was going to kill you. The person who hired me wanted Trevor to know why he died, and I was supposed to tell him. Everything about this case has seemed wrong, but I'm certainly not going to kill Travis. If you want me to, I'll leave, but I'd rather stick around and protect you, and, if you need to talk about anything, I'll listen. I'm good at that too."

He sighed, "As I said, I'm doing this for Shirley or maybe more for our daughter Ann. She's five now. Trevor liked to steal girls and women from me just to show that he could, and they all suffered from his attention. Shirley was weak, but she would never have hurt that girl. She probably went along with the kidnaping, but, when Trevor raped the kid, she probably tried to protect her and he killed her too. And, yeah, I suspect he raped the kid with both his penis and with the dildo. Our parents died when we were young, but Trevor seemed almost normal until we reached puberty. Oh, he liked to hurt things even then, but, when we started doing things with girls, he always wanted to do whatever hurt most. A couple of girls had to go to the hospital because he took them anally without any preparation or any lubrication. And I think he raped every girlfriend I had in my teens, although he always convinced them it wasn't rape. I quit even having anything to do with girls, just for their sakes until, finally, Shirley and I got together in college, and we were really happy. Of course, I forbade Trevor to even come around, and Shirley was okay with that because she didn't like him at all. It took Trevor over five years of trying to get to her, but get to her he did. I suspect he raped her, then convinced her she had led him on and caused it. If he doesn't go to prison, I've decided that I'm going to kill him. It's my duty to Shirley and to the world. Oh, you told me your name was Fran, and now you say Bliss. Which do you want to be called?"

"Both names are mine, but the ones who know Bliss don't live, but I'm not going to hurt you. Nobody here will know Fran for more than a call girl. We'll worry about taking out Trevor later when we finish with all this, if you still want to then" Fran told him. Now for some dinner. Want to shower with me or separately?"

Travis looked a bit shocked, then grinned, "What the hell. I'll shower with you, if that's okay. I haven't showered with a woman since Shirley. In fact, I haven't much more than looked at a woman since Shirley. You seem to think you can take care of yourself if Trevor comes after you."

They stripped and headed for the shower. Fran decided that what Travis had been hiding looked as good as what could be seen with clothing, and the way he looked at her made her feel desirable too. Still, nothing erotic happened in the shower except for the exchange of back scrubs. That was enough to cause Fran's nipples to feel like little pebbles, and she saw that Travis was not immune to her touch on him or his on her. They made it back to the main room and dressed casually for dinner.

Travis said that it wasn't far down the street to a little café that had barbequed pork ribs, something that Fran had not tried. Travis actually smiled on the walk to the café, and, although

their conversation over dinner might not have met with Amy Vanderbilt's approval, they enjoyed each other's company. Fran didn't know Travis's financial situation; so, she passed him a twenty and insisted he let her pay. She told him she was on expenses, which was almost true or would have been true if she hadn't intended to refund the million.

On the walk back, Fran noticed that a crowd was gathering near them and whispered to Travis, "Be careful. Something's going to happen here. Let me handle the physical part." At the next intersection, they were shoved into an alley, where they were surrounded by eight men. None had guns, but two had knives, and three had blackjacks. Fran was unsure whether this meant they would only be beaten a bit or beaten and stabbed to death, none of which she intended to permit.

One man with a knife stood on the opposite side of Travis from her; so, Fran maneuvered herself so that she could put him out of action first, and, as soon as she was in position, she struck. When she had immobilized six of them, she looked and saw that Travis had taken the last two out by ramming their heads into the brick wall.

"I thought I told you to let me handle the physical part," she said.

"Well, I was just standing around with nothing to do while you seemed fairly busy," he grinned. "I just followed your lead."

"You could have been hurt," she complained, then decided he could benefit from some praise. "Well, actually you were quite good at that." They surveyed the scene and saw that all the eight probably had concussions; five had broken arms; two had smashed kneecaps; and the hands that had held knives would never hold a knife comfortably again. They left the group lying there and went on their way without notifying the police or doing anything else to the fallen thugs. Fran was still uncertain whether the aim was to kill or hurt and intimidate, but it didn't really matter. Whoever was responsible would now know that a disciplined fighter was on the scene. "I hate to do that," she said, "but I didn't see any other choice because he had that knife pushing into you."

"I was waiting for it to stick in me when you took him and two more out before I could even move. What are you? You're not a call girl; that's for sure."

Fran was about to throw up but controlled it and replied, "Well, I've worked at many things when the assignment required it, but I'm a private detective and a killer. I'll tell you all when we get back to the room if you will hold me tight then. I'm going to be sick here in the street if we don't hurry" They didn't say much more as they hurried to the hotel and up to the room.

Travis wrapped a blanket around Fran's shoulders and held her in his arms as she shivered after vomiting. After several minutes, she said, "I usually get like this after I resort to violence. On the other hand, I've killed over a dozen men and didn't feel upset over any of them because every one of them deserved to die many times over. Thanks for holding me. I think I'm better now."

“I enjoyed holding you for whatever reason and will be happy to continue, but I suppose I’d better not give you any attention you don’t desire, if I want to continue living” he said with a smile. “I’ve told you my sad story. Shouldn’t you tell me yours, now? Or will that require you to kill me?”

“Don’t joke about that,” she answered. “And I’d like for you to hold me as long as you want; all night will suit me.” She told him about the detective agency and about the special service she offered when there was no other way to bring a person to justice. She considered glossing over the sexual aspects of the killings, the night of Bliss, but she decided to just tell it all. She emphasized the proofs she required before she would even consider taking a special case and, after a bit of reflection, said that she had killed fourteen men.

“Well you took this case and were ready to kill me,” Travis said. “And I’m certainly not guilty, maybe immoral, but not guilty of any crime much worse than jaywalking.”

“I was a bit slipshod on this,” she admitted. “I neglected the research to find that Trevor McFarland had an identical twin brother. But there was no way I would have killed you anyhow without putting you to several tests. Also, everything about you yelled ‘good man.’ I would have paid heed to that, too. But you’re right; I was sloppy.”

Travis said, “I’ve thought about ending it all a few times, and, now, you tell me that this way I would go out enjoying the best sex of my life. It might have been worth it.”

“I don’t think you’re likely to do it if you can joke about it like that. And, if you want to, you can have that best sex tonight, anyhow,” Fran told him.

“What if I just cuddle with you and hold you tonight?” Travis asked. “It’s been so long for sex, I’m almost scared to start again.”

“That’s fine with me,” she said. “I certainly don’t want to sleep alone tonight after what happened this evening.”

They did cuddle and sleep together that night, and, next day, they attended the car show, which they enjoyed. Fran noted the presence of federal agents and others, probably from the mob, who were tailing Travis, who they thought was Trevor; however, she didn’t point them out to him because he might have accidentally tipped them off. No one attempted to hinder or molest Travis, but, when they returned to the suite after the day’s fun and a good meal, Travis received a special telegram. He paled after reading it, and Fran moved to his side. “It’s okay to read it,” he said.

The telegram was long and read, “Thanks, sucker. While you kept everyone occupied as me, I got back in the country and got located where I want to be. Did you really think I was going to do anything for Shirley? She deserved what she got. Enjoy what Yolanda has planned for you. -- T.”

The sending office was Kansas City, Missouri, but Fran knew that meant little; Trevor had probably covered his tracks by bouncing the request from office to office. She could probably follow it up, but Trevor might no longer be near where the message had started.

Travis knew that Trevor had not got in contact with the attorney general to clear Shirley's name and wondered why he had dared hope he would. He sat dejected on the side of the bed, and Fran kneeled behind him, putting her arms around him and squeezing. "I needed a cuddle last night, and somebody else needs one tonight.

She knew he needed more than a cuddle and began removing his clothes and, then, her own, and, for his part, Travis just did whatever she told him to do. It had probably been years since he had enjoyed intercourse with a woman, and Fran wanted to spare him the embarrassment of lasting only a few seconds once they began. She didn't particularly like semen in her mouth but decided to press on anyhow. After giving him some relief and making sure he was ready again, she noted that his facial features were coming to life again along with other parts of his body, which was good because she didn't like making love to a zombie. She kissed him and began making love to him slowly, and he was participating fully. Although she had started this without particular concern for her own well-being, she found that she was getting as excited as Travis, and, finally, they exploded at almost the same time. After a bit, she lay beside him, draped an arm over his chest, and traded kisses with him.

"I didn't think I could ever do that again," he whispered to her. "I don't know exactly how to ask this. You may think of this only as job-related, but it meant more to me. May we date after this? Or do I dare bring you into this? Trevor has hurt every woman or girl I ever got close to."

"First, yes, I'd love to date you, if you'll have me. Making love to you ceased being job-related last night when you cuddled me after we met those guys. And, if you still want to, we'll take Trevor out. But be sure you want to because he is your brother, and, if we start, we'll have to kill him."

"I'm ready. As I said, I owe it to Shirley. How will we do it?" he asked.

"Is your daughter safe? We need to be sure of that first," Fran said.

"Ann's with Shirley's parents. They're the closest thing I have to family, good people, dying inside because of what Shirley is accused of having done. The police in the town where they live keep a close watch on Ann. I don't think Trevor can get to her."

"I don't have any family either; so that's one thing we don't have to worry about. Can you get a newspaper to print a false wedding announcement? It'll state that we're married, and, from what you say, Trevor will come after me."

“Why make it false, if you are willing to have me?” Travis asked. “I certainly like being with you, and you seem to like me, and we appear to be okay in the sex department. I’m not much of a catch, I’ll admit, but I’ve felt more alive in the short time I’ve known you than at any time since I don’t know when. I feel as if I’ve got a chance against Trevor’s schemes with you at my side. And did I mention that I like you?”

“It’s okay with me if you want to take on my several loads of baggage. You can’t even say that I can scare you off only if I’m a mass murderer because I am; well, I don’t really consider them murders, but the police might, and lots of people would think that getting off from having sex with a man while you are killing him is over the top. I think it is pretty bad, myself.” She asked herself if it was really okay to settle down and marry a man she barely knew, but she answered that she knew him well enough and that, yes, dammit, it was okay.

“And you think I don’t have my own loads of baggage?” he asked. “Can you live with me? My parents left me and Trevor quite well off and I probably don’t need to work, but I teach math at a community college.”

Fran met with her client, Mr. Gonzalez, and returned his money. “He’s guilty, but that was his brother in Memphis. I’m still going to kill Trevor, but you’ll probably never see a notice of it. This one is on the house, and I’ll remind him of your daughter Maria as I kill him.”

The announcement was for the wedding of Travis L. McFarland and Frances B. Steele. Fran moved in with Travis and made the purchases she needed, the most up-to-date surveillance and monitoring equipment they could find. It was all very expensive, but she didn’t care what it cost. Together she and Travis installed it where she wanted it.

Travis took Fran to meet Ann and Shirley’s parents, and she agreed that they were nice but seemed very sad all the time. She explained to them that, although what they would do was illegal, she and Travis were going to attempt to get proof that Ann’s mother was innocent of harming the young girl and had probably tried to save her, although they knew the evidence wouldn’t hold up in court. She also told them that there was a small chance she and Travis might die in the attempt and that, if so, she was leaving two million dollars to Ann with them as executors until Ann was an adult. She asked them if they would consider letting Ann live with her and Travis part of the time if they survived. She left them liking her and approving of her as a suitable companion for Travis, although she didn’t tell them about any of her activities except as a detective.

As they had predicted, a few months later, Travis received a letter. It stated, “I’m coming to get little Frances. You couldn’t ever hold on to a woman. I’ll take her just like I took the others. — Trevor” The letter had a postal box as a return address, and Fran considered having it watched but decided that the mail was probably forwarded from it to another box. She could have checked them all, but it didn’t really matter. Trevor would be here where she wanted him sooner or later. They decided it was for the best not to reply to the letter.

About a month later, another letter came. Its message was, “I’m going to rape little Fran and, then, slice her up just like I did Shirley. And you are going to watch me do it this time. — Trevor”

A third message arrived saying, “Tell Fran not to be as stupid as Shirley, and I won’t hurt her as much. Shirley thought she could stop me from taking that little slut in the butt. Maybe I’ll get Shirley’s daughter Ann next. You want to watch that too? — Trevor”

They left all these messages and their envelopes with a lawyer with whom Fran had worked before, along with instructions on what to do with them in case Travis and Fran died. These would prove to Ann and Shirley’s parents that Shirley was innocent, although the prosecuting attorney would probably not change the conclusion that had been made.

About six months passed before the monitoring equipment revealed that Trevor had arrived on the scene, although he hadn’t been into their house yet. Fran and Travis went over their plans.

“There’s danger to you if we do it this way,” Fran told him. “We’re fairly sure he wants you to watch him rape me and then kill me, and you will need to be alive for that. But he could change his mind. I can probably stop him if he does, but that’s not absolutely certain.”

“I’ll take that chance,” Travis said. “It’s you I’m worried about. He says he’s going to cut you up, but he could have a gun. With what I’ve learned from you, I could probably take him out myself if he gets close to me, even if he has a gun.”

“Probably, you could, but I’ve trained since I was a kid. He doesn’t want to kill me before you see him rape me; so, that gives me an advantage,” Fran replied. “What is going to be difficult is to just let him tie you up and pretend I don’t know it.”

As it turned out, Trevor did have a handgun when he broke into the house. Travis let himself be ‘surprised’ and gagged and tied up. Fran watched the proceedings unobserved from the next room, then entered with a bottle of ale in each hand, “Travis, I brought . . .” She looked startled when she saw Trevor standing beside Travis with a gun in his hand. She set the bottles down on a table, saying, “What . . . ?”

“Hi, Fran,” Trevor said. “I came to see Travis’s new bride. She should be my bride too. Don’t you think he should share with me?”

Travis tried to say, “Leave her alone,” but, with the gag, it came out garbled. Fran was not sure whether his saying that helped or worsened the situation.

She just put her fist to her mouth. “Don’t,” she said. Although she didn’t think he would harm Travis until he had killed her, she needed to get him away from Travis and his attention turned

away from him as soon as possible. She moved herself so that he could trap her in a corner and began backing up slowly. Trevor advanced on her, and she let him get closer.

Suddenly, she stopped and curtsied to him, “Yes, I’m Frances, and I’m also Bliss. Remember Maria Gonzalez, Trevor? I’m sorry you won’t get your night of Bliss before you die.” He turned pale and, although he had the gun in his hand, he didn’t think of using it at first. While confused thoughts were going through Trevor’s head, for the first and only time in her life, Fran aimed a blow to kill. Trevor was dead before he hit the floor, and, although he still held the gun, he had no reflexes to pull the trigger.

She quickly untied Travis, and they undressed Trevor’s body and put it into the hole they had dug in the flower bed, which could not be observed by neighbors. They put a layer of stones, which they had collected and stored in the shed, on top of the body and filled the hole with soil. The flowering plants were still in pots and were placed back where they had been. So far as the outside world knew, Trevor had never been there.

Fran had expected to be overcome with nausea from using her skill and discipline to kill Trevor, but the only thing she felt was relief. Travis was safe; Ann was safe. Maybe, Shirley’s spirit felt better too if it still roamed the earth. Any mourning Travis might have done for his brother had been done years ago; the man they buried was an evil being who met the end he deserved.

### The Present

When Fran finished her tale, she told the agents, “You may be happy to know that, although killing Trevor didn’t cause me to be nauseated, I do still get ill from violence. About twenty years ago, three young toughs tried to rob us and another elderly couple when we were out for the night. I didn’t even have to hurt them much because they were just punks, but I still nearly threw up after it was over.”

“Fran, you may have killed people, but it seems that you always focus on helping people. And you gave some important information there that may stop everything in its tracks,” Tom told her.

Sally got on her cell phone to call the regional prosecuting attorney. “Little problem, chief. You remember that murder nearly fifty years ago that you-know-who committed? It was blamed on Trevor McFarland, but these people have proof that Trevor McFarland was dead over a year before that murder. Yeah, he’s McFarland’s brother. How do I know you-know-who did the murder? I did some research, and any competent person could find the same with a little effort. I know he’s an icon, but I know he was guilty” She listened a while. “Okay. We’ll do that.” When she finished on the phone, Sally asked for a bottle of ale, and Travis supplied ale to everyone. “We aren’t supposed to drink on duty, and that’s the reason I’m doing it. It looks like the prosecutor will squash any indictment against you, Fran,” she said, raising her bottle in a toast. “I don’t know about these two knuckleheads, but I’m certainly happy about that.” The knuckleheads were quick to approve also.

As she and the two men were preparing to leave Fran and Travis, who were hugging each other tightly, Sally said to them, “I don’t believe anyone will be bothering you any more with the threat of prosecution for any of the people you eliminated; however, if they do, call one of us three. They may have some questions for you in trying to tie up some loose ends, but I’d recommend against answering even those questions unless one of us is present or has okayed it. We’ll bid you bye now and try to find some real criminals.”

Before they parted, Rick gave a word of advice, “You two look like you have lots of years of life left, but, when you do go, many years from now, I hope, please leave this property to someone who won’t dig up the flowerbed.”