



CRASHER

by

Debbie Kuhn

They wanted Martin to finish the game this time. He refused to look at them, but he knew they were watching as he lifted the gun to his temple. His hand shook, and he could smell his own fear in the sweat that trickled down his chest and back.

A gentle breeze wafted in through the window in front of him, carrying the scent of spring blossoms, while throaty female laughter drifted up from the sidewalk below his apartment. People were gathering at the cathedral across the street.

He thought about saying a desperate prayer, even though he didn't believe in God, but then the three of them moved into his peripheral vision. He felt the boy's hatred and anger wash over him in an ice-cold wave.

Martin pulled the trigger and heard a quiet *click*. No bullet.

He slumped in his chair, limp-limbed with both relief and disappointment. His foot knocked over what was left of the Maker's Mark.

He still had to finish the game.

Martin took a great gulp of sweet air and turned his head slowly to the left. As usual, the little girl's face wore a confused, frightened expression. Her mouth and neck were bleeding again, which had caused a few strands of her long black hair to become plastered against her pale cheek. When he made eye contact, she took a step forward and stretched out her hand to offer him a reminder. Her severed tongue wriggled around on her bloody palm.

The gaunt-faced woman stood behind her children, weeping incessantly and barely making a sound.

"You're dead," Martin whispered. "You're not really there."

According to his former shrink, the apparitions were simply manifestations of the anger, guilt and grief he'd been feeling since returning home from Vietnam. Martin didn't argue against the theory because he didn't believe in ghosts.

But he was fucked either way. As long as he continued to breathe they would continue to exist, haunting his every waking moment and invading his whisky-soaked dreams.

"Keep taking your medicine, Mr. Sinclair. The pills I've prescribed should help you sleep and make those hallucinations go away."

Wrong. After eight weeks of treatment, which had included a brief hospital stay, Martin had pretended to be cured and had flushed the little white pills down the toilet. A few days after that he had marched into the bedroom and retrieved his dad's old service revolver from the bottom of the cedar chest.

There were no prescription or illegal drugs that could give him any pleasure or peace – he had tried them all. There was only one way to end his torment.

Like father, like son.

Even with a generous dose of liquid courage in his veins, Martin had only been able to pull the trigger once the first couple of times he had played the game. He had fought like a savage to stay alive during his tour of duty. It was hard to give up on life now, a year later, when he was only twenty-two.

But they would never go away, never leave him alone. And he was just so *tired*.

Martin shuddered and tore his gaze away from the little girl. Time to finish it. He should have died with his friend Smitty anyway. The scars on his face and body were nothing compared to the ones that crippled his soul.

He raised the revolver to his temple again. It felt even heavier.

Martin closed his eyes. *Click.*

Click.

He started to pull the trigger a fourth time, but stopped. He could hear a woman singing. A soprano. The sound seemed to be coming from right across the street – inside Sacred Heart.

Ave Maria, gratia plena, Maria, gratia plena, Maria, gratia plena, Ave, ave dominus, Dominus tecum, Benedicta tu in mulieribus, Et benedictus, Et benedictus fructus ventris, Ventris tuae, Jesus. Ave Maria.

Martin lowered the gun, letting it rest in his lap. Tears sprang to his eyes and his whole body tingled with pleasure.

Ave Maria, mater Dei, Ora pro nobis peccatoribus, Ora pro nobis, Ora, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, Nunc et in hora mortis, Et in hora mortis nostrae, Ave Maria.

Martin felt warm, comforted. The apparitions – those figments of his tortured imagination – moved closer to his chair. The boy looked furious but Martin couldn't be touched by it. He watched in amazement as the phantoms began to waver and then fade.

They disappeared completely with the last note of the song.

“Jesus.” Martin jumped to his feet and the revolver clattered onto the hardwood floor.

He had to see the woman. He had to know who she was.

Martin paused just long enough to slip on a ratty pair of tennis shoes and then he raced out of his second floor apartment and down the hall, taking the stairs instead of the elevator.

The traffic on Waverly Place wasn't heavy for a Saturday evening in Greenwich Village and Martin was grateful. He was so excited he might have ended up as road kill otherwise.

The massive arched doors to the church were standing open – an invitation. The interior felt cool and dark after his exposure to the bright warm sun and Martin stood still for a moment to let his eyes adjust. The apparitions still had not returned. It had been ages since he'd been able to leave his apartment on his own and act like a normal person.

The woman was singing again. It was a song he didn't recognize this time, but he thought she sounded like an angel of mercy. He walked into the nave of the Gothic-style cathedral, and couldn't help feeling as though he were leaving the whole wicked world and his tragic past behind him.

White paper bells and streamers decorated the ends of the pews, which were crammed with people dressed in expensive suits and frilly dresses. Martin stayed next to the stone wall on the north side of the church, passing underneath the stained glass windows. He moved closer to the high altar where the middle-aged woman stood singing. She was tall and slender and her hair fell in dark ringlets around her face. Diffused, rose-colored sunlight poured in and bathed her in an ethereal glow – an effect magnified by the floor-length spangled dress she wore.

Martin knew the woman loved him. She loved everyone when she sang, and her singing was a gift that allowed her to bestow peace and the purest form of pleasure upon her audience.

When the song was finished, Martin realized that tears were streaming down his face.

The woman gracefully descended the steps of the high altar and chose a pew on the south side of the nave. The organist resumed her playing and Martin realized it was time for the wedding ceremony to commence. A bridesmaid appeared in the center aisle, followed by a half dozen others.

Martin moved to the back of the cathedral and sat on the edge of the last pew next to a heavy-set lady dressed in pink chiffon, who immediately covered her nose with a handkerchief. Her eyes filled with disdain at the sight of his stringy blond hair, stained white T-shirt and torn bell-bottoms. She tried to put more distance between them, but Martin wouldn't let her.

“The woman who was singing – what's her name?” he whispered.

The lady stared at him as though he were an idiot. She lowered her lace handkerchief just long to answer his question.

“Elaine Vittorio. She used to be an opera singer.”

Martin had hailed a cab after the wedding ceremony and had followed the guests to the reception hall a mile away. He was hoping Elaine would sing again, but he had not even seen her there. It wasn't long before a member of the wedding party had asked him to leave. The groom was the son of a senator.

A week passed and Martin still felt euphoric. He had never believed in miracles before, but he was beginning to think Elaine's singing had somehow cured his insanity by chasing away the guilt-induced hallucinations.

It was like she had put the pieces of his fractured mind back together tightly enough to lock away the horrific memories of the war and keep his personal demons bound and gagged. He was free to enjoy life again. Hell, he didn't even need the crutches of cigarettes and alcohol.

Martin's mother noticed the change in him right away when she dropped by for her weekly visit that Saturday morning. Natalie was always in a rush, in control, and always looking her best. (Martin had never seen his mother wearing anything but Halston suits and evening gowns.)

At exactly ten sharp, she swept unannounced into the two-bedroom apartment she still owned, presumably to make sure the groceries she had ordered for her son had been delivered, that the maid had shown up on Friday, and that Martin was still alive.

Yes, yes and yes.

Martin was sitting at the breakfast table when his mother walked into the kitchen. He was eating a stack of pancakes fit for a lumberjack.

"Well, I'm glad to see your appetite has finally returned." She leaned over and planted a quick kiss on his right cheek. The left side of his face was scarred.

"And if I'm not mistaken you've even taken a shower recently."

Martin nodded, his mouth full of syrupy flapjacks.

“Those sessions with Dr. Sylva are finally paying off. When’s your next appointment?”

He didn’t want to admit the truth, even though he had never told her about the hallucinations.

“Tuesday, I think.”

“Good.” His mother’s expression softened a bit.

Martin had once been her “pretty blue-eyed prince.” He knew she wanted him to see a plastic surgeon about his face.

Maybe he would. The last few days he’d been thinking a lot about his ex-girlfriend, Sharon Bohmer. He kept wondering what her reaction would be if he contacted her again.

Martin had enlisted in the army on Valentine’s Day the year before. He’d been a senior at Columbia University with a college deferment. His grades were up and his I.Q. was down, or maybe he’d just been too drunk and pissed off to know better. His mother wanted to mold and shape him into a spineless replica of his father – make him president of one of the family’s banks, perhaps set him up to fail. His softhearted girlfriend just wanted him to join a commune, protest at an occasional war rally and pretend to be a vegetarian.

In retrospect, Martin wished he’d quit college and run off to California with Sharon to raise goats and chickens.

“Martin, are you listening to me?”

“Huh?” He looked up and saw his mother standing in the living room.

“I have to leave - André has the car waiting for me out front.”

Her townhouse was only two blocks away, just across from Washington Square Park, but she refused to walk anywhere in Manhattan. It wasn’t like she needed the exercise.

“And when did *you* start liking opera?” She had just noticed the pile of Elaine Vittorio albums on the coffee table.

“A week ago, actually.” Martin had just bought the records the day before, hoping they would help him keep the lunacy at bay.

“Hmm.” His mother focused her attention on the gilded oval mirror that hung above the sofa. She pushed a lock of her frosted blond hair back into place. “Elaine was a member of my club before she retired from the Met.”

Martin was curious. “Why did she quit her career so early? She can’t be more than forty.”

“Her husband was in a car accident about a year ago. It left him in far worse shape than you’ve ever been.”

Martin went to the library a week later and found some old newspaper articles about Elaine. They confirmed what his mother had told him. Al Vittorio was now a quadriplegic. Elaine had given up the career she loved to help care for him. Martin also learned the singer had joined Bob Hope’s Christmas show in ’68 and had traveled to Vietnam to entertain the troops. Now she only sang at the weddings and funerals of people she loved or admired, be they relatives, close friends or celebrities.

It had been exactly two weeks since Martin had seen Elaine perform in person. He had been able to sleep soundly at night and he had boundless amounts of energy during the daylight hours.

After visiting the library, Martin had gone to a Saturday matinee to see *The Godfather*. He had thought about asking his ex, Sharon, to come along, but he still didn't have the balls to call her. That night he lounged around eating junk food and watching sitcoms until the eleven o'clock news came on, at which time he flipped President Nixon the bird and went to bed.

(Read the rest of this story in the Apex Digest themed, featured writer anthology, Gratia Placenti ("for the sake of pleasing"), due to be released in early December. Keep checking the Recent News page for details on how to pre-order the book.)