Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Rage Against the Dying

Written by Becky Masterman

Published by Orion Books

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

RAGE AGAINST the DYING

BECKY MASTERMAN



First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Orion Books,
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Becky Masterman 2013

The moral right of Becky Masterman to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the
prior permission of both the copyright owner and the
above publisher of this book.

All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance
to actual persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN (Hardback) 978 1 4091 4369 7
ISBN (Export Trade Paperback) 978 1 4091 4370 3
ISBN (ebook) 978 1 4091 4371 0

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers
that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and
made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging
and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to
the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

www.orionbooks.co.uk

Prologue

From his idling van atop the Golder Ranch Road bridge, Gerald Peasil examined his next girlfriend. With his elbow leaning out the open window, and his face resting on his forearm, the slide of his lips back and forth on the hair of his arm aroused him a little, that and the salty sour odor of his skin. No hurry to introduce himself. Savoring the anticipation of meeting was part of the thrill

The little woman would have been poking among the rocks in the dry riverbed below, too busy to spot him. She didn't have all the qualities that her picture promised. Sure, wisps of gray hair snuck out from under her khaki canvas hat, and she leaned on her walking stick whenever she stopped to examine a rock, but her body was so erect she could almost pass for hot.

The idea of a hot granny frightened Gerald a little, but no matter. It had probably been a lifetime since she got any, and she'd welcome the attention of a younger man. With his free hand Gerald rearranged himself through his thin nylon workout shorts and thought about his own mother. Mom used to grab him there really hard to discourage him from touching himself, until he got big enough to smack her across the chest with her prize Amway skillet. Dad thought that was pretty funny, only told him he should pick on someone his own size.

But anybody telling Gerald not to touch himself from then on was asking to swallow their own teeth.

Gerald turned the van left at the end of the bridge and eased down the steep hill that stopped at the edge of the dry riverbed, what they called a wash here. He paused again and looked up and down the wide expanse of sand that was the color of wet concrete.

It was mid-August hot and not a dry heat by any standard. The summer monsoons had pummeled the desert in the last couple of days, so the usually dry sand showed dark rivulets where the rain saturated the ground. Another storm like the one last night, especially in the Catalina Mountains to the east where the river started, and the wash would fill with water, would "run."

But today you could walk in the riverbed, as the woman was. While Gerald watched, she shifted her exploration to underneath the bridge and faded from his sight. He was unconcerned; she couldn't see him either and that gave him all the time he needed to plan what he would do next, and next, and after that.

Gerald put the van in gear and turned at the end of the bridge down the dirt road that led to the very edge of the wash. He stopped just before the packed dirt became tractionless river sand and maneuvered a careful three-point turn so he faced back up the hill. That way the back of the van was open to the wash for ease of loading, and, if they had unexpected company, he'd be able to get the hell away. He didn't worry about whether she could hear the engine. A second dirt road that ran along the side of the river meant other cars sometimes came this way so she wouldn't be alarmed at the sound of his. Besides, she was likely hard of hearing. At that thought Gerald blew a little puff of air out his nose, in a kind of laugh.

He jerked up the emergency brake, got out, and made sure the blue plastic shower curtain was smoothed out on the floor of the van and the restraining straps within easy reach. He picked up a set of pliers that had fallen from their niche on the side of the van. A place for everything and everything in its place. When he had tidied up and made his preparations, from a small box he pulled a roll of duct tape and yanked off a six-inch piece which he stuck lightly on the

front of his sleeveless T-shirt so it would be at hand when needed. Then he pushed the doors shut but didn't close them altogether.

Gerald stopped once more to check out the hillsides on either side of the wash. Just a few prefab houses clinging to the side of the hill. Sweet location, from a made-to-order wet dream. There wouldn't be the fuss there was sometimes getting them into the van. He fingered the square piece of foil attached to a string around his neck and stuffed it down under his shirt.

His rubber flip-flops skidded on the fine gravel covering the slope into the wash, but he recovered. Tucking an oily strand of hair behind his ear and adjusting himself one more time made him feel presentable enough to approach his date.

The woman appeared not to notice him as she picked up rock after rock with her bulky garden gloves, examined them, threw some away and put others in a dusty olive green backpack resting on a larger stone. That was a good sign, her ignoring him. You could tell they were a little fearful if they didn't look at you. Fear was a good sign.

As he watched she bent down and one-handed a rock that looked to be about five pounds. Did a couple curls with it. Maybe not so old after all?

But then he got closer and saw that, yes, this was the one he was looking for, and she was ripe. Face not wrinkled, but lined a little with the dryness of the desert, and a trace of softness along the edge of her jaw. Gerald sucked in a sudden breath as he thought about running his nose over that jaw. Freckles sprinkled the part of her chest that showed above the neckline of her T-shirt. So thin and frail he wondered if her hips might break when she spread her legs. Fantasies of cracking bones aroused him again. She took off her hat and wiped her face with it. The hair that looked gray on first sighting from the bridge glowed white in the mid-morning sun.

The reflection of the sun in her hair made Gerald think about how goddamn hot it was. At least a hundred and five, maybe more. More humid than usual, too. You could almost feel steam rising off the wet sand. His head itched and he scratched it, picking the residue

from under his nails as he picked his way through the hardening mush of the riverbed.

A trickle of sweat ran down his inner thigh, matching a sheen of moisture where the woman's denim shirt formed a V between her cushiony breasts. Ten degrees less would make this a whole lot more comfortable. Most guys of his persuasion did their work at night, but when your specialty was older broads you had to take advantage when the opportunity arose. All the older ones had been to the early bird special and were in bed by the time darkness fell.

His thoughts for a moment took him far away from the wash, to other sites and other women. Returning, Gerald was surprised to discover the woman looking at him. No "hi," no friendly wave, just observing him with an unblinking gaze. Her left hand that held the stone paused in mid-curl. She was so still she creeped him out, made him want to back away, to nix the deal. But then he remembered there was more than just satisfaction at stake here.

"Hiya," he said. The urge to tug on his balls was unbearable but he knew it could be off-putting in a new relationship.

"Hello." Her rich, elderly vibrato made him swell. Hers was an odd voice, not high and airy like most old ladies, but almost as deep and strong as a man's. She looked down briefly at the boner pushing up from underneath his shorts. Her head jerked involuntarily, and gave a little tremble. Maybe she hadn't seen a hard-on for a long time. Maybe she was excited.

"You okay down here?" Gerald asked. Back and forth in the sand he bent the rubber edge of his flip-flop, casually, to show he was relaxed, to put her off guard until he could get closer.

Her eyes crept to the right and left of him, scanning the mesquite trees on the side of the wash with the intensity of prayer. She started to speak, coughed once, unsuccessfully, but managed to croak, "Fine." In the sand her walking stick swizzled nervously.

"It's a hot day and it's noon," Gerald said. "You could get dehydrated before you know it, and no one around." With that he took a step closer, not directly but a little to the right like a coyote sidestepping to figure out the best approach to his prey.

The woman didn't deny she was alone. "I've got water in the bag."

She indicated the backpack nearby, then turned her head to look at the bridge above and behind her, at a single car going over and going gone. Funny how most of them never screamed for help, like they'd rather be dead than embarrassed if they turned out to be wrong. She turned back to him, startled, as if afraid she'd looked away too long. "I want to get back to my rock hounding. Please."

"What's with the rocks?" Gerald asked, shaking his head, taking a step closer, a little to the left this time.

"I like rocks."

"Are you a—what do you call it—"

"Geologist?" The woman asked. She was very still again. You could almost imagine her tongue where it stopped after hitting the *t* sound.

Step closer, little to the right. "Yeah, a geologist," he said.

"No . . . please, lea—" she stopped in mid-word, as if knowing that begging Gerald to go would make what was happening to her too real. As if it would rub her face in her own vulnerability.

"Well, that's good." Gerald wasn't much for small talk. He had kept angling toward her while they spoke, right and left, like the rivulets in the sand, so she wouldn't get scared and bolt. Sometimes even the ripe ones could give him a run for his money, and it was too hot to chase her.

But standing flat-footed, alert yet indecisive, gripping her walking stick, this one let him come within about four feet. Her steadiness made Gerald falter again. Then he remembered hearing about people being paralyzed by fear. She looked like that. Maybe he'd just pick her up under his arm like a stiff cardboard cutout and carry her back to the van that way. He puffed another laugh. Later when he had her secured he'd have to tell her that one.

The hand that held the rock suddenly shifted, getting a firmer grip.

"That looks heavy," Gerald said. "Let me help you with that."

"No," she drew out the word, made it sound a lot like please.

He was near enough now. Fast as a nightmare Gerald closed the gap between them and knocked the rock from her hand so she couldn't drop it on his foot. He took a few steps back again to gauge the effect.

Still unmoving, she might as well have been another rock for all the reaction she had. This wouldn't be any fun if she didn't get scared.

Was she some kind of retard? Gerald licked his lips. He'd never done a retard before. Maybe a more direct message was necessary. He tugged on the string around his neck to raise up the foil-wrapped condom attached to it. Not like he needed a condom—there would be no evidence to be found—it was just to make them think he wasn't going to hurt them. The woman studied the little package resting on the outside of his T-shirt.

Maybe now she understood.

The woman's eyes widened.

"Why?" she said, fear now taking up what he knew would become permanent residence on her face.

Gerald only grunted with his final dash forward and the effort of grabbing her arm by the wrist and wrenching it behind her back. With his other hand he tore the duct tape from his shirt and clamped it over her mouth.

The woman flailed ineffectively at him with her walking stick, really just a dowel of the kind you got at Home Depot, not much heavier than balsa wood. When she did connect with his hip, the stick swinging behind her, he could hardly feel it. He knew the fifty feet or so to the van was the most dangerous time. If a car went by, and if the person happened to look, they would see struggle. But she was small, and weaker than he thought when he saw her lifting the rock. The most she could do was drag her feet, which she did mightily. Gerald punched at the back of her knees with his own to buckle her, and that made the rest of the way go faster.

One more sharp knee to her backside and into the van she went, messing up the shower curtain. He could tell she noticed the dried blood underneath it. The duct tape kept her from screaming as she tried to get very small against the back wall. That gave Gerald a moment to close the doors to the van, to get her secured before taking them both to his place near San Manuel, about a forty-five-minute drive north.

Now that they were safe in the van, the woman cowering and so in shock she didn't realize her hands were free to pull off the tape, Gerald took a more leisurely look at her. The canvas hat had been left in the wash, and the wisps of pale hair he had spotted were falling

among thick white waves almost to her shoulders. The only sound for a moment in the van was her noisy breathing. Somehow she had kept a hold on the dowel, and pointed it at Gerald, not knowing it was about as threatening as a chopstick. He held out his hand, palm up, kept his eyes on hers.

"Give me the stick. Come on, sweetheart. Give me the stick. I'm not going to hurt you. I just wanted to come in out of the sun. Talk about rocks." Gerald puffed a laugh and grabbed at the stick, then sucked his breath back again. A sharp sting on the palm of his hand made him release the stick. He gazed in surprise at a gash that ran from the bottom of his index finger to the top of his wrist. As he watched, blood seeped up through the cut. What had caused that? His blood had no connection to what he imagined happening in the van. He struggled to put the blood in context and then saw that it wasn't just a dowel she held. It was a dowel with a blade attached to the end, a blade that formed a triangle with a razor on one side and a point at the end.

He saw the blood before he felt the real pain, and felt the pain before he felt the rage when the woman ripped the duct tape halfway off her mouth and the exposed side grimaced.

She was thinking. In the shaved moment while she watched the pain reach his consciousness, watched him process the absurdity of an attack by a woman who two minutes ago had been immobilized with fear, watched the rage flash in anticipation of his own counterattack, she was thinking.

The dried blood on the floor of the van confirmed she wasn't his first. There were bodies hidden somewhere. She was in a unique position to confirm that without the legal strictures of interrogation and defense counsel. But he was stronger than she had originally judged, and it had been a long while since she had moved in these ways. A little less strong, reaction time a little slower, she was out of practice, and the confines of the van limited her options more than she had foreseen. She should not have let him get her into the van; that was an error in judgment.

Things may have already gone too far, but no time to think about that now. For now she felt her forty years of conditioning kick into fight or . . .

That was it, fight. There was nowhere to run.

One

Ten days earlier . . .

I've sometimes regretted the women I've been.

There have been so many: daughter, sister, cop, tough broad, several kinds of whore, jilted lover, ideal wife, heroine, killer. I'll provide the truth of them all, inasmuch as I'm capable of telling the truth. Keeping secrets, telling lies, they require the same skill. Both become a habit, almost an addiction, that's hard to break even with the people closest to you, out of the business. For example, they say never trust a woman who tells you her age; if she can't keep that secret, she can't keep yours.

I'm fifty-nine.

When I joined the FBI there weren't many female special agents and the Bureau took advantage of that. A five-foot-three-inch natural blonde with a preteen cheerleader's body comes in handy for many investigations, so they were willing to waive the height requirement. For a good chunk of my career I worked undercover, mostly acting as bait for human traffickers and sexual predators crossing state or international lines.

I did the undercover work for nine years. That's about five years

longer than usual before agents burn out or lose their families. Because I never married or had children I might have done more time if it hadn't been for the accident that necessitated fusing several vertebrae. It could have been worse; you should have seen what happened to the horse.

The surgery made problematic many job requirements—leaping across rooftops . . . dodging knife thrusts . . . lap dancing. I could have taken disability but couldn't see what life would look like outside the Bureau, so the second half of my career was spent in Investigations. Then I retired.

No, that's not the whole truth. Toward the end I was having a little difficulty making decisions. Specifically, a couple of years ago, I killed an unarmed perp near Turnerville, Georgia. Contrary to what you see in movies, FBI special agents seldom use deadly force. It causes the Bureau embarrassment. Look at Waco, or Ruby Ridge. As for the agents, they're not trusted so much anymore and the defense can use it against them in court, paint them as a rogue who might plant evidence or slant the facts to fit a case.

There was an investigation by our internal affairs group, the Office of Professional Responsibility, which cleared me with a decision of suicide by cop. The civil suit by the relatives of the guy I shot took longer and was more expensive. That's another thing you don't see in the movies, that the evil serial killer has a large extended family, including a sister with a limp who teaches special needs children and who testifies that her scumbag brother is the sweetest person who ever lived.

The family claimed I shot him because I was afraid he wouldn't get convicted. They lost, but it left a bad taste in everyone's mouth. By that time my career was over and they reassigned me to the field substation in Tucson, which everyone told me was a lovely place but that felt a lot like Siberia, only hot. I hated the agent in charge and lasted a little less than seventeen months before opting for retirement, which is what they were hoping for in the first place.

Now that's the whole truth. Mostly.

For a year I gave retirement my best shot. I joined a book club, but the other women started ignoring me when they found out I never

read the book. I tried yoga at the advice of a therapist who said it would help my "anger issues" but was kicked out by the Bikram instructor after she wouldn't let me drink water in a humid room with a temperature of one hundred degrees. I'm the one with anger issues? Namaste, my ass.

I kept going to the gym every other day to at least stay in shape, which had always been pretty good, and absolutely necessary given the work I did. I had to be able to improvise, to be flexible. I had taken special ops training from a Navy SEAL named Baxter. That was his first name. I can't remember his last. We were very close and he was wise, for a trained killer. Whenever I picture Black Ops Baxter he's cracking crass jokes about teaching me to use my cleavage as a weapon. He's dead now, Baxter is.

Come to think of it, like the kid in that movie, I might know more dead people than live ones.

But back to my retirement: it felt like I was still undercover, temporarily posing as a Southwestern Woman of a Certain Age. If anyone asked me what I did for my work, I told them I investigated copyright infringements. That always killed the conversation because everyone has copied a video at some point.

I'm still gifted at disappearing into whatever environment I encounter, fading into the background, happy to succeed at what other women my age dread.

That's who I am, and that's what I hid from my next-door neighbors, from my beloved new husband, and sometimes from myself. No one likes a woman who knows how to kill with her bare hands.

As I said, retirement didn't work out that well except for, also at the advice of my therapist, auditing a class on Buddhism at the university. That's where I met the Perfesser. And shortly thereafter stopped seeing the therapist.

Mutual attraction was fairly immediate. During the first lecture I watched the intense Dr. Carlo DiForenza pacing back and forth in front of the class lecturing like a caged tiger who had eaten the Dalai Lama. In the middle of Carlo's review of the cyclical nature of karma, one of the girls, wearing a tube top that squeezed her out the top like toothpaste, pressed her elbows together and said, "Oh, you mean, like,

'wherever you go, there you are.' " The professor's pacing stopped and he blinked out the window without turning toward the speaker, a tiger distracted by a gnat.

"Contrary to what that bumper sticker says," I drawled, "it's not precisely true."

Carlo finally turned to the class and zeroed in on me. His grin shot to my loins. "Go on," he said.

"It's my experience that it takes about a year to catch up with yourself, so you don't have to worry as long as you keep moving."

He started blinking again. I expected I was going to be treated to a condescending retort. Then his grin returned. "Who are you?" he asked, emphasis on the "are."

"My name is Brigid Quinn," I answered.

"We should speak of this over dinner, Brigid Quinn."

Most of the students tittered. Tube Top only looked chagrined to have been trumped by an older woman.

"I hardly think that's appropriate in the middle of class," I said.

"What the hell," he had replied. "After this term I'm retiring." He was a lot more aggressive with me in those days. I was a lot more honest with him until I fell in love on our first date. I'll recall that date later if I'm feeling a little stronger.

Within the year, I married Carlo DiForenza and moved out of my apartment and into his house north of the city. With a view of the Catalina Mountains out the back window, the house itself had been decorated by Carlo's Dead Wife Jane in the style of my crazy Aunt Josephine—that is to say, red-fringed lamp shades and faux Belgian tapestries with depictions of unicorns. The large backyard had a life-size statue of Saint Francis sitting on a bench. That was all right; I had never decorated any place I'd lived and this fit the kind of person I wanted to be like ready-made slipcovers.

The house came with a set of Pugs, which are sort of a cross between Peter Lorre and a bratwurst. The dogs were given to Carlo by Jane just before her death from cancer five years before; she figured caring for them would give his life purpose after her death. We kept intending to name them.

But the best part of the deal was Carlo.

It, the marriage I mean, all happened so fast I could hear my mother whispering one of her platitudes, "marry in haste; repent at leisure," but I knew what I wanted. What I actually had I wasn't quite sure even now, but that meant he hardly knew me, and as I'd never known another way to live I was comfortable with that. One may say this is not the basis for a good relationship, but I'd learned my lesson: keep the violence in the past and focus on learning how to be the ideal wife. Ideal Wife was the woman I would be now.

Carlo took his time as well. He learned not to sneak up and hug me from behind and would place his palm ever so gently on my cheek so I would lean into it instead of tighten. He never tried to pry out of me the reasons for my fight-or-flight behavior, and I was certain he agreed it was best not to know. I was slowly relaxing, learning to trust him, and life was perfect except for those times in the middle of the night when I was overwhelmed by anxiety, when my heart would start to pound in habitual terror that he would leave me, that I would lose everything I had at last found.

That first year we made love, walked his Pugs, seduced each other into our favorite cuisines (him sushi, me Indian), watched movies (I discovered an appreciation for indie mind benders, he for things blowing up), and collected rocks.

I particularly liked the rock hounding. Besides being pretty, rocks don't change, and they don't die on you. My best local place for rock hounding was a quiet wash about a half mile down the hill from our house, under a bridge where Golder Ranch Road crossed it. The summer monsoon season, a flooding rain that brought the desert all of its yearly eleven inches within a few short months, tumbled the rocks from the surrounding mountains to gather there.

On the day I'm recalling, in early August, I had walked to the wash by myself, filled my backpack with twenty pounds of anything that looked unusually colorful, and trudged back up the hill, feeling a little woozy with the hundred-degree temperature but glad for the workout.

Soon I sighted our backyard at the eastern edge of the Black Horse Ranch subdivision. We're a recent anomaly, surrounded by the real

desert dwellers. People with horses. People cooking meth in their trailers. When it rained you could smell horse manure, and sometimes trailers blew up.

Does that sound critical? After spending most of my life in urban apartments I actually loved this rural area the way you love a sloppy old uncle who tells good stories from the war. I loved the smell of horse manure, and the occasional bray of a donkey coming from an unknown location when the wind is very still, and the reminiscent bark of gunfire from the direction of the Pima Pistol Club.

But like I said, what I loved most was Carlo. Tall as Lincoln with a slight Italian accent, Roman beak, mournful Al Pacino eyes, and a bad-boy smile to contradict them.

When I lugged the backpack into the kitchen and dumped the rocks in the sink to rinse them, Carlo was making hummingbird juice, mixing water and some strawberry-colored powder. Without my asking him to, he had hung the feeder on the white thorn acacia tree in the front yard where I could watch the hummingbirds from my office window.

The sight of him fixing the feeder for my pleasure made my heart . . . swell to overflowing is supposed to be a worn-out phrase, but for me it's a brand-new feeling.

This may seem an unusually strong reaction to a man filling a bird feeder. If you have led a relatively peaceful life you will not appreciate its value and treasure it the way I do, not understand what it feels like to go day after day with that vibration in your chest, as if you carried inside of you a violin string that has just been plucked but now the string is silent and still because the threat of violence is long past.

Now I was living in peace with a man so gentle and sensitive he gave sup to hummingbirds. Does this seem precious? I don't give a rat's ass.

"What do you have to give me?" he asked, pouring the juice through a funnel into the clear plastic container. His low voice and the glint in his eye made the question a double entendre.

"Just some pretty rocks, Perfesser. You'll have to tell me what I have."

I turned to the sink where I'd dumped the stones, rinsed them off one by one, and placed them still wet on the dark granite counter for Carlo's examination.

The rinsing heightened the vivid colors, smooth blood red, vanilla ice cream, round and speckled green like a dinosaur egg, silver shot with black specks. We opened the color atlas of minerals in the southwestern United States to see what we had.

Carlo was no more a geologist than I was. Rather, before becoming a philosophy professor, and before marrying Jane, he'd done time as a Roman Catholic priest. Father Dr. Carlo DiForenza could explain either linguistic philosophy or comparative religion so simply a learning-disabled bivalve could understand.

Carlo and I sat side by side on the stools by the breakfast counter where he leaned his gaunt frame over the stones like a giraffe protecting her young. His thin fingers tickled the rocks as he admired each one individually.

"Pudding stone," Carlo said, pointing out the picture in the book. "See the quartz plugging it? I can imagine the megasurge of heat that boiled the granite into a juice that mixed all these elements together. Then a plunge of temperature that hardened the elements into a single mass with each mineral distinct. Gorgeous, Brigid. Oh, and you found some more shot with copper."

I squirmed a bit and leaned closer. Plugging, megasurge, plunge, juice, shot—is it just me, or did Carlo talk dirty about a billion years of geologic activity as if they were one hot night of sex? Plus I got a kick out of watching him stroke the rocks.

The geo-erotica started working on us both. We went from stroking the rocks to stroking each other's fingers stroking the rocks, and I made a lame joke about getting our rocks off and then I started licking his fingers and then Carlo started murmuring Bella, Bella, which is what he calls me when he's feeling romantic and I didn't care if he used that so he wouldn't accidentally call me Jane because I knew in my heart that this time Bella meant me. That's how it goes when you have a lot of life behind you, no self-delusion.

He didn't mind that I hadn't showered yet. We slipped off the stools onto one of Jane's faux Persian rugs. Turkish. Oriental. Whatever. And

kissed. But the Pugs stared, and lovemaking on the floor didn't have quite the charm it once had. We moved into the bedroom and tossed aside Jane's pink satin comforter with the blue trim.

The sex was spectacular, but don't worry about my going into details of the act. You may be younger than I, and won't like to think about someone outside your generation making love. For you the image may be embarrassing, vulgar, or comic.

Carlo and I were none of those.

While he dozed afterward, as always, in grateful lust I thanked him silently, from the center of my soul, for letting me live in his normal world. For giving me this new self, different from the one defined by any of the other women I had been.

But gratitude for the present invariably came with memories of the past where I'd learned my lessons. One of the things I brooded about: Paul, gentle, widowed Paul of the cello and the truffle oil, of the two cherubic preschoolers, Paul repulsed by me despite his best efforts. As gently as he could even though he thought I couldn't be hurt, *See, Brigid? You stare into the abyss of depravity, and sooner or later it begins to stare back. The abyss is where you've lived for so long you'll never escape it. I fear it too much to live there with you. I can't expose my children to you.*

I was still terrified to think I might destroy my relationship with Carlo the way I had the last time and determined that I would do nothing to make that happen.

Paul was the last man I tried to be honest with, twenty-two years ago. I still wonder what made me leave that crime scene photo on the kitchen counter. I didn't expect the children would find it.