

# Black as Night

## Chapter One

*... a girl as white as snow and red as blood with hair as black as night...*

—Grimm

**I**t was night.

In most places, Night is a time for sleep, calm, and mystery. But not in New York City.

In the tangled thicket of the urban landscape, millions of streetlights, arcade signs, neon tubes, and incandescent bulbs conspired every evening to murder the night, shedding their unearthly glow. The glow grew stronger as Night slipped in with her gray wool cloak and dropped it softly over the streets and subways.

The subway train rushed through the hot summer night like a sleepless dragon bellowing and hurtling along its metal track towards West 55<sup>th</sup> Street in the Bronx. Two youths slipped like phantoms from car to car, casing each jointed metal compartment for easy cash.

The older, fair-headed one first noticed the girl through the door window in the swaying car ahead. She looked lost, frozen. She didn't see the two vicious denizens of the Night, but they saw her—and they saw the purse clutched tightly in her lap.

This was it. This girl with her short, ragged, black hair, white skin, and eyes red from crying was their hit. She was alone in the car, staring at the floor, apparently not aware of anything around her. It was after three in the morning. As if on cue, the boys both checked over their shoulders to see if they were watched, grinned at each other and pushed through the separating door.

She looked up when they came in and she saw. At once. What they intended to do.

Her cry of surprise and fear was lost as the rocking car made a rough and deafening turn on the tracks. She stumbled to her feet, prepared to run. But there was nowhere to go.

It was too easy. They were fifteen and nineteen years old, and used to violence. The fair-headed nineteen-year-old, actually a bleach-blond, shoved her onto the car's dirty linoleum floor. She fell, her pale yellow flowered print dress splatting under her like a smashed flower. The younger, bigger one, with the earring, grabbed her bag.

The girl didn't seem to care. She scrambled to her feet, resurrecting quickly and silently, and jumped for the emergency cord. The yellow-haired boy lunged after her and knocked her against the seats. A wail and moaning seemed to break forth from the beast's belly, as the tunnel walls suddenly widened out. The girl screamed and shoved him away from her. He fell onto the seats and banged his head against the edge of the seat with some force.

It was time to move. The train was coming to a halt, a station careened towards them. The bigger boy stuffed the purse inside his light jacket and burst through the doors as they opened. He leapt to the deserted platform, a slab of concrete in a burned-out neighborhood. The fair-haired boy was still staggering to get to his feet, furious. The girl dodged around him, and ran out of the dragon's belly, an escaping yellow flame. Surprisingly, she didn't stop to call for help. She just ran.

That was odd. Cursing, the fair-haired one regained his feet, looked after her and felt his blood stir to the chase. He sped across the platform after the fleeing form of the girl.

Greasy streetlights looming above in the humid night. Trash crushed in all the crevices of the broken concrete. No one around in the artificial light pools. Nocturnal creatures or nocturnal scavengers moving from shadow to shadow. A bleach-blond boy easily trailing a yellow cowslip girl, whose footsteps hammered to the beat of the cacophony of hidden nightlife, looking for someplace to hide.

His big pal joined him from out of a narrow alley, grabbing at his arm. "What're you doing?" he hissed, jogging to keep up with the other's smooth lope.

The fair one didn't even bother to answer, his eyes fixed on his prey. The girl had paused at a corner and looked around, breathing hard. She saw them, and darted down another street.

"Look at her. She's not from this part of town. She's gotta be lost. She can't go anywhere," the fair one said, by way of explanation. He ran on, pulse racing. His companion followed.

Down beneath the train tracks, the dragon's skeletal feet, she ran, crossing a street, in and out of crosshatched shadows. Past a string of closed and barred and spray-painted stores—pawnshops, long-distance phone places, drug stores—

She had to be slowing down soon, the fair one figured. Soon she would be too disoriented and too beat to go much further...

Unexpectedly she halted and took off in a new direction, as though inspired.

They could see the girl was staggering now. A faint flickering figure with not much left in her... The two boys ran on, feeling sure that they were closing in. They wore sneakers, were used to racing for their lives.

Then the fair boy saw the church. It loomed in front of them, a gray-slabbed old mausoleum of heavy oak doors and a huge round window like a black spoked wheel that seemed to float ominously above their heads. The fair boy actually paused, but his pal, now intent on their goal, jerked him onward.

Ahead, the girl was running, stumbling, yanking at the neckline of her dress. She was hurrying up the steps; she was jamming something into the lock...

The fair one had seen that move before, a lady they had mugged shoving her car keys into the lock of her car, leaping in to make an escape...But this was a *church*, he thought. What sort of girl kept keys to a church?

Incredulous, the boys watched the door open, swallow the yellow and white and black figure, and close, like a mouth obstinately shut.

Cursing out of sheer disbelief, the boys jumped up the steps and seized the door handles. Locked. Neither door would budge.

"She's gone."

They hardly knew which had spoken. It was like a drug haze. Around them, the City continued in its dead sounds of machines and boom-box music sliding in and out of the streets, in and out of consciousness.

The fair boy stared and finally turned to his friend. “Did we just follow a girl out here?”

“We swiped her purse.” He tugged at the zipper of his jacket.

The church stood silent before them, betraying no secrets. No echo issued from beyond its walls.

At last, the older boy shook his head. “Some kind of weird. Like it never happened.”

“But it did. Lookit!” the big boy had fished out the purse, unzipped it, and thrust it at his older companion.

A mass of hundred dollar bills stared out at them. Gingerly, the fair-headed boy touched one as though it were enchanted. But it was real, thick green and white paper beneath his fingers. This was something they understood.

They didn’t know how or why a girl would come to be carrying thousands of dollars of cash in her purse in a subway late at night. And they didn’t care. The important thing now was to move quickly, before she could call the police. Once again, in unspoken unity, the boys wheeled away from the door—their astonishment already forgotten in the hurry to get where they could gloat over their treasure.

The church stood a silent soldier against the slow destruction of the night.

## II

Brother Leon whistled softly to himself as he strode down the corridor in his bare feet after morning Mass. It was Sunday, and today it was his job to make breakfast for the six other hungry men in the friary, who would soon be finishing morning prayers.

Swinging the heavy knotted rope he wore as a belt, he loped into the kitchen with an easy stride and swung the refrigerator door open. Out on one hand came a box of cracked eggs, out the other dangled half a loaf of bread and a gallon of milk. Sliding them all onto the cracked linoleum counter, he flipped open the freezer door and tossed out a squashed frozen orange juice, catching it in his other hand as though it were a basketball.

Still whistling that morning’s hymn, “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name,” he twisted the dial on the stove to “medium-high,” slid the frying pan from the shelf to the burner, daubed in a hunk of margarine, and began cracking the eggs into the soon-sizzling pan and tossing the shells into the sink in syncopation, so that the hymn sounded like the bridge to a rap song.

Brother Leon’s eyes and hair were dark; his skin was a warm brown, the result of a happy marriage between a Puerto Rican and a Jamaican. He was short and wiry. Like the other friars of the community, he kept his head shaved Marine recruit style, but he wasn’t able to match their full beards. As he scratched the itchy fuzz that was all the beard he had been able to grow, he discarded the last shell, tossing it over his shoulder from halfway across the kitchen as he went to get a lid. He knew, without looking, that he had made it. Years of basketball gave you that sort of intuition.

Speeding up the rhythm of his whistling, he scrambled the eggs till they were fluffy. Stove off. Lid on top. Pam! OJ in the pitcher, water on. Stir. Sloshing orange juice and water until the liquid deepened to a golden whirlpool, he ended the vigorous exercise

with a tap of the wooden spoon on the counter and tossed it over his back into the sink. This time, his throw was off. He heard the spoon glance from the counter to the floor and sighed.

Shrugging, he headed for the refectory with the breakfast. From the corridor came the slap of bare feet and sandals and the vocalizations of six men hoping for coffee and eggs.

Coffee! Leon slapped himself on the forehead as he set down the food on the pine plywood refectory table. *Leon, how could you forget again?* Groaning, he turned back to the kitchen, only to see the ancient coffee maker sputtering out a stream of brown brew. Brother Matt, glass coffeepot in hand, was gathering the precious drops in a mug.

“What the—” Leon shook his head, bewildered. “I could have sworn I forgot to do that!”

“You did,” Matt set the pot down calmly, smiling through his curly blond beard. “Typically, morning people like yourself who don’t need a drug to wake them up forget about making coffee.”

“Whew!” Leon heaved a sigh. “Well, thanks—you saved my skin. If I forget again, I’m sure Father Francis is going to write flogging back into the Franciscan constitutions!”

“Probably,” Matt grinned, his blue eyes snapping. The head of the order was notably short-tempered where his coffee was concerned. “I have to admit there was a less charitable motive behind my making coffee for you.”

“What’s that?” Leon rummaged through the drawers, piling spoons, forks, knives, and plates into his arms.

“There are two kinds of religious brothers in the world, Leon. Those who can make coffee, and those who can’t. I’m sorry to have to tell you which category you’re in.”

“Hey, I haven’t attained my earthly perfection yet. That’s why I’m here. But thanks all the same, Matt.”

“Any time,” Brother Matt looped his cord over his arm and carried the coffeepot and his own share out to the refectory where the other brothers were taking their seats.

Leon halted in the doorway as Father Bernard, the lithe dark-haired friar who was the resident mystic, murmured a blessing over the meal and the cook. After the fervent “Amen,” Leon stepped forward and began hurriedly to pass out the plates and silverware.

“Sorry, there’s no toast yet,” he apologized. “It’s coming.”

“Who has the margarine?” Father Francis peered round the table over his coffee cup, his bushy grey brows twitching.

“Coming!” Leon quickly left and re-emerged with a plate piled high with toasted bread and the tub of cheap margarine. The eggs had already mostly vanished from the pan, and the toast quickly dispersed throughout the gray-robed crowd. Leon took one last look around and then pulled back his chair with a sigh. There was a sizable garbage bag on it.

“What’s this?”

Brother Herman, a portly older friar who looked like Santa Claus on vacation, wrinkled his forehead. “I forgot. Clothes donation. I meant to bring it to storage last night. Here, I’ll get it.”

Despite the twitches of irritation that ran through his innards, Leon heaved the bag on to his shoulders. “Naah, I’ll get it. I’m up.” Sighing inwardly, he heaved the bag on to his shoulders and went out the door.

Religious life was filled with little frustrations like this one. You had to learn to live with the shortcomings of other men. *Besides*, he reflected as he ambled down the corridor, *this can be my penance for forgetting to make coffee again.*

*Ah, who said that loving your neighbor was easy, anyhow?* He swung into the small hallway that connected their house, an old rectory, with the church. The temporary clothes storage room was the vestibule of old St. Lawrence Church. It was packed with garbage bags stuffed with coats, shoes, socks, and underwear that generous families from six parishes had donated to the homeless. *Someone ought to organize this room*, Leon scowled as he looked around in the dim light for a bare place to stick the new bag. Well, at least someone had started to sort out the men's jackets into a pile on the floor.

Then Leon froze, his jaw dropping.

When he recovered, he spun on his heel, and darted back into the hallway. Luckily, Father Bernard had already left the table and was in the hall, talking quietly to Brother Matt. Leon caught Father's eye and motioned in bewilderment. Nodding to the other brother, the priest came down the hall, his gray habit billowing behind.

"What is it, Leon?" Father scrutinized Leon's face.

Leon led him into the storage room without a word and pointed.

Brother Charley was lumbering by, having come from answering the doorbell. Big, burly, and slow, he had led a wild life long enough to have a nose for trouble. He followed the other two friars into the storage room, towering over them. "What's up?" he asked, and then his eyes widened as he saw.

There's something about the atmosphere of a small friary that speeds up communication. As Brother Leon hurried up the passage to get Father Francis, he nearly bumped into Brother Herman, who was apparently seized by curiosity at the furtive movements of his brothers.

"Something going on?" the older friar asked confidentially.

"Just a crisis—in the storage room," Leon inched around him.

"Another rat?" Brother Herman's face wrinkled into a grin as he glanced at Matt. "We'll have to get the slingshots out again." The rats of the South Bronx were legendary in size.

"Uh—Father!" Leon waved at Father Francis, who was still nursing his coffee cup at the table.

A few moments later, Leon was leading Father Francis back to the storeroom. Charley was still there, squatting before the lump in the corner. Herman and Matt were trying to get a better view. In front of them, Father Bernard looked clearly lost. The whole community was gathered in the vestibule now—even reclusive Brother George had left his chores to peer around the doorjamb. The silence was almost funereal.

"All right, move aside. Who said we needed group support here?" Father Francis said, elbowing his fellow friars aside. Brother Leon saw Father Francis's bushy white brows shoot up his wrinkled forehead as he saw the object: a slim, white ankle nestled in the sleeve of a jacket. "Heaven help us," the community's founder muttered, and Leon knew they were both thinking the same thing—that someone had dumped a body in their friary. He could see the headlines now: **BODY OF YOUNG WOMAN FOUND IN FRIARY. POLICE FILE MURDER CHARGES.** "Just what we need," Leon murmured to himself, sweating slightly.

Brother Herman was frowning. He had edged closer to the pile of coats and was leaning his chubby frame over the body; turning his red, round face this way and that. Finally, he leaned back heavily with a sigh. "I think she's just sleeping," he said in a stage whisper to Father Francis.

There was an almost audible group sigh. "Well, that's something to be thankful for," said Father Francis briskly, in a soft voice. "But why should she be sleeping here?"

His blue eyes traveled over the somber, bemused faces of his brothers. "Did anyone let her in?"

Six bearded friars shook their heads. Brother George's face was quite red.

"Well, I suppose we should wake her up," Father Francis straightened, and then, for once, looked uncertain. Nobody seemed inclined to disturb the owner of the white foot.

Leon, who had grown up with three sisters, swallowed and put out a hand to touch the coat-covered body. But before his hand touched the coats, the sleeper moved.

### III

There are many beautiful churches in Italy, and even the tourists who walk in and out of them become pilgrims, of a sort. Bear tried to figure out, as he sat in the church of Santa Cecilia in Rome, whether he could classify himself as a particularly devout tourist or a rather casual pilgrim. He had been sitting there for a good forty-five minutes in the nave of the church lit by the natural light coming from the dome above. In the beginning, he had been consciously praying, but his stream of meditation had dissipated into random thoughts in the haven of the ancient stone structure. The last Sunday Mass had ended some time ago, his brother had gone back to the hotel, and now he was mostly alone, studying the ceiling structure and support pillars of the church, trying to picture how the building process had transpired. The thought of building a church like this one was fascinating to him.

Just across from him was the hallmark statue of Saint Cecilia. Despite the fact that he had now seen thousands of souvenir replicas of it on the street for sale, it had not lost its ability to move him. Father Raymond, his late mentor, had once told him the story. The statue had been carved in 1599, when Cecelia's tomb had been discovered, and her body found to be miraculously incorrupt. She had been the victim of a botched beheading around the third century.

The statue below the altar showed the slim body of a young girl lying face down on her side, her veil swept gracefully back, her head barely attached to her body. But despite the grisly detail, her form lay curled up as serenely as though asleep, her arms, carelessly thrown to one side. Her pose was deceptively accidental, for her fingers were curled in two deliberate symbols. On one hand, one finger points out, and on the other, three, proclaiming One God, Who is Father, Son and Spirit.

Despite his fascination with the architecture, Bear found his eyes drawn repeatedly to the smooth white form of the statue. It was mysterious to him. He wondered with bemusement what it could really mean. A girl. Death. Witness. Beauty. How they could all go together at once.

And as usual, his thoughts went from the statue of a girl to the real girl waiting for him on the other side of a stormy ocean, and he pondered again if it was time.

He had come to Europe to escape some problems and to find some answers. Almost a year ago, his life circumstances had changed drastically—he and his brother had been cleared of a crime they hadn't committed, and because of this, the substantial inheritance they had received when their mother had died had been restored to them, somewhat grudgingly, by their father. Bear's father had made it clear in his communications that he still wanted nothing more to do with his crazy religious sons, but the brothers' financial difficulties were taken care of, at least for the next few years.

But the sorting-out period had been difficult and prolonged, with legal proceedings and at least two court cases to get through before his life could be called "normal." After a while, Bear had felt the intense need to escape, and had arranged a long trip to Europe. He had spent most of his time wandering in and out of churches and other buildings like this one, looking at the bones of the architecture and wondering if he could become a stonemason or a sculptor. It had given him a long-needed rest after the stress, uncertainty, and danger of the past few years, but it had taken him away from her.

He thought of Blanche, a slender girl with white skin and black, black hair, long and shining like a dark wet rope down her shoulders. Blue eyes. Deep eyes, which said, even though she still might look like a child, she was almost a woman.

What did you do with a girl like that? Especially when she looked at you as though you were greater than you suspected you actually were, and you still didn't know who exactly you were.

Of course, as more worldly men knew, if you had a girl like that, you could look at her body and avoid her eyes, and thus avoid the whole question of who you were, or who you would be if you stayed with her. But he just couldn't do that.

Because of that, he didn't let himself touch her very often. Granted, that was difficult. Still, he didn't think it would be fair to her to do otherwise.

\* \* \*

At the airport, he had asked her, just before he got onto the plane, "Does it bother you that I'm leaving?"

"Yes," she said at last, quietly.

"Do you want me to stay here?" he asked, worried.

"No," she said, and pushed back her black hair. One strand ran down her white cheek like a black ribbon. Her eyes were looking down. "I understand."

He didn't know what to say to her, and felt like a jerk, that he was leaving. Letting him go was a big thing for her to do. He was grateful.

He ran a finger down that black ribbon of hair. "I'll be back before you know it," he said.

"Will you?" she asked, looking up at him unexpectedly, and he saw then that she knew what he was thinking. That was the way Blanche was, almost preternaturally sensitive. Her intuition was very strong.

"As soon as I get things sorted out, I promise," was all he could say. Before he had gotten to this moment, he had thought about kissing her goodbye, but now it didn't seem right. Instead, he touched her fingers. As he shouldered his backpack and turned away onto the gray tube of the plane, he thought for a moment what it would have been like to kiss her, and even though he knew it wouldn't have been fair, that missed kiss hovered in

the air before him. When he turned to look back at her, she was still watching him. She smiled at him.

And receiving that smile was as good as a kiss.

\* \* \*

Now, in the church of fair Cecilia, the brave young girl of long ago, he studied the knuckles of his hands, knitted together. His hands were big, like Father Raymond's had been. And for the longest time, he had thought, when everything had sorted itself out, that he would become a priest.

Was that what Father Raymond would have wanted? Bear felt he knew his mentor's mind so well, but he had never been able to figure that out, when the man was alive. He remembered asking once, "Do you think I'm the sort of guy who would make a good priest?"

He could still remember the smile that creased Father's face. "So what are you asking me, Arthur?" the priest had asked, and thrown the basketball over his head.

"I'm just wondering," was probably what he had replied, as he dodged to catch the ball. They were on the court, their usual routine after high school. Bear had never cared much for sports, but the priest, a tall, energetic man, shot hoops every day from 2:30 to 2:45 in the school gymnasium or the rectory parking lot. And Bear, who was called Arthur back then, and his brother had found it was the natural time to talk with Father, right after school let out. Sometimes the talks that began on the basketball court continued as the priest went on to his other tasks.

That day, they were in the rectory parking lot, and his brother wasn't with him, probably delayed in the library. "What makes a man a good priest—or a good husband—is being a real man. What distinguishes a real man is that he is able to give all of himself, without reservation, to the call. He doesn't just *want* to be able to give his whole self, but is actually able to, without holding anything back," Father Raymond had said, twisting the ball between his capable hands. "You need to be able to give your whole self."

Bear had thought about those words for a long time. Certainly he had felt that desire to give himself whole-heartedly to do a single thing. For example, when Father Raymond had been murdered, he had seen what he was supposed to do for the next few years. But once that was over, the free-floating fuzziness that had haunted him as a teenager returned.

Perhaps Blanche had sensed this. As the months went by, she had seemed to withdraw a bit, watching him, waiting for him to decide. It seemed to make sense to take some time off, go to Europe, remove himself from everything familiar for a while, in order to think and see if that call was really real, or just his imagination.

So he had traveled around Europe, sat in churches, tried to listen, tried to recover some sense of what it was that this mysterious God might expect of him. But he couldn't say the experiment had been a tremendous success. He did feel a little less restless, much less agitated, but he didn't feel any closer to knowing what his task was.

He had been writing to Blanche frequently. Always preferring the low-tech option, he had decided to use pen and paper to communicate with her instead of email. Besides, Blanche didn't have a computer in her home. He had sent her quite a few letters over the past few weeks. She hadn't sent him quite as many, although since he was moving



around and she was remaining in the same place, it was natural that it would be harder for her letters to reach him than for his letters to reach her. He had tried to call regularly, since he usually enjoyed talking with her, as he always had.

Now it was the beginning of August, and he was starting to think about returning home. For one thing, the smell of the hot pavement in Rome reminded him awfully of the heat of New York City.

He had persuaded his brother to come over to Rome for vacation so they could do some sightseeing together before he returned home. Fish, as usual, was in total contrast to his older brother. He knew exactly what he wanted to do with his life: study history and literature. He had jumped into university studies with characteristic intensity, announcing his intention to finish his undergraduate degree in two years, to make up for lost time.

It had been hard to extricate Fish from his summer schedule of classes and papers, but in the end, Fish came. He reported that Blanche, who had offered to water the plants in their apartment while he was gone, seemed a bit stressed and anxious. But she was occupying herself with working and visiting old people in her spare time, and was going to be happy to see Bear again. Bear was glad, but he still did not yet know what he was going to say to Blanche when he saw her.

A letter had arrived that morning from Blanche, but Bear hadn't yet read it. Again, he wasn't quite sure why. Now he drew it out of his pocket and turned it over. Somehow he knew when she was sending him a "heavy" letter. Their last talk had been a bit heavy, too.

Chastising himself for delaying, he opened the card and read it quickly.

*Bear,*

*I was thinking about our last conversation.*

*I don't know if I told you before that this summer at work I met a man who is dying, and I've been visiting him. He has no visitors except for me. Why? Because he won't forgive the people who hurt him, including his relatives and his sons. Now he's dying alone—well, practically alone. I'm the only visitor he has, and he doesn't seem to be well taken care of, so I've kept visiting him, even though it's sad to be around someone so bound by the past. It's very sad and so senseless. Even terrifying.*

*All I can think is that I don't want to see you become like this. I don't want to see you hardened, like this man is, by years of unforgiveness.*

*Not that I want to change you. But it seems that your past has a hold on you. Do you think that maybe you can't find peace and direction in your life because, on some level, you won't forgive?*

*I can only say this to you because you're my friend. Maybe seeing so much this summer has made me bolder. Or just more anxious that my friends and family don't end up like this man.*

*I'm sorry if this hurts you. But I thought you should know.*

*With love,*

*Blanche*

He turned over the card in his hand, creasing it shut with a touch of resentment. He had to admit it wasn't altogether unexpected, given the tenor of their last talk, a week ago.

Thing is, Blanche had no idea how hard it had been. Well, he hadn't told her much, but she seemed to sense more than he was letting on, as usual. She wanted him to talk about it. He just wanted to put it behind him.

He rose and genuflected, a little distracted, before turning toward the door. As he did so, a curious disquiet came over him. Why did he suddenly feel as though he were running away?

*All right*, he thought, looking back at the white marble statue of the fallen girl and speaking to it as though she were Blanche. *All right. You want me to talk about it? We'll talk.*

Mentally he said a token farewell to St. Cecilia. Once out in the courtyard, he flinched at the heat of the afternoon day as he walked back to the hotel. It was siesta time by now—for everyone except the crazy Americans.

Up in his room, he quickly dialed Blanche's number, after calculating the time change. It would be six hours difference—after nine by now. But Blanche usually worked at her catering job till past midnight on Saturday nights, and now she would still be sleeping. *I should wait a few hours*, he told himself, reining in his sudden emotion.

Frustrated, he sighed and replaced the receiver. He unfolded the letter and read it again. She was only saying to him what Father Raymond had told him before. And he knew he should do it, but it was going to be difficult.

Something was odd about the letter, but at first he couldn't make out what it was. He studied it more closely.

Blanche's penmanship was usually precise and perfect, as good as calligraphy. She was a perfectionist that way. But this handwriting was more erratic, almost sloppy. If he hadn't known before opening it that the letter was from Blanche, he might not have recognized the writing as hers.

*Something's really agitating her.* He picked up the phone again and pushed the numbers of the Briers' home number. He remembered that Blanche's mom and sister were on vacation, and that Blanche had been alone in the house for the week. All the more reason why he should call to make sure she was all right.

As the phone made the connection and started to ring, he tried to come up with something to say to Blanche, to explain this unusually timed phone call. *If something's really disturbing her, I'll hear it in her voice*, he told himself.

And if she *was* all right...? He wished he could say something groundbreaking to her, but he couldn't think of any way to begin except, "I got your letter..."

The phone rang, and rang, and rang, and rang. The answering machine came on. He hung up and dialed again.

And again.

And again.

There was no answer.