

Advance preview of the sequel to *Go Stand Upon the Rock* (2012). This second part of the continuing saga of the family of former runaway slave, Cornelius Ridley, is entitled, *And Bury My Bones at Eden*.

Part one of the trilogy, *Go Stand Upon the Rock* (2012) spanned the years from 1831, when Nat Turner and his rebellion arrived at the gates of Bonnie Doon Plantation in Southampton County, Virginia, eight years before Cornelius was born there to a mother he would never know nor remember, until 1889, shortly after Cornelius' son, William, a bright young law student, survived being murdered by a hail of bullets during a hotly contested Pennsylvania state senate election, just two weeks before his upcoming marriage to Josephia, a beautiful and mysterious clairvoyant from St. Croix in the Danish West Indies.

The saga resumes here, exploring Josephia's privileged past, young Ridley's start of a remarkable 54-year legal career, and his cousin Casper White's life or death struggle after enlisting with the legendary Harlem Hellfighters in World War I, earning war wounds and the *Croix de Guerre* — Frances's highest military honor — along with the rest of the courageous black soldiers in this entire regiment. The lives, triumphs, and tragedies of members of the Ridley family are interwoven into this literary tapestry, until William dies on a bitterly cold, dark winter night in February 1945 leaving still more of the story to tell.



[Astor Mansion in New York City. Public Domain]

Chapter 1

Spirit in the Night

June 5, 1856, New York City. In the darkness of the second floor of St. Ursula's – a Victorian style convent school in toney uptown Manhattan – a shadowy figure floated down the long, dimly lit corridor carrying a lantern. Her footsteps were faint but each one caused a wobble of the cone of light encircling the lower half of her body shrouded in black – with only an occasional flicker illuminating her gaunt and somber face. The large ring of keys she carried jingled softly with each step, evoking the eerie sounds of eternal chains dragged by some ghostly inhabitant of another dimension.

Dour and wiry, Sister Mary Katherine Agathonica was on her nightly rounds to insure the virtue of the young women left in the care of the convent by affirming that each one was safely ensconced within their tiny cells – some of which were surprisingly well-appointed – in the dormitory of the august old building. She seemed to execute her duties with an authoritarian zeal missing from most of the nuns in this order, who labored for the spiritual and educational enlightenment of the young women residing within – some of whom were obviously well-to-do. Although many were destined for a life of service to the church, others were daughters of upper-crust families, international bankers, and foreign diplomats who viewed their time in this purgatory as punishment for past or possible sins until a suitable marriage could be arranged which would secure their financial futures. And they were not pleased to be held in what some considered mundane and joyless captivity. So, a few of the feisty ones gleefully tormented Sr. Agathonica as much as she apparently tormented them. As she made her nightly vigil, she remembered all too well her time on the streets of the city as an orphaned and homeless immigrant girl, until she was rescued from a life of certain perdition by the charitable Sisters of Mercy. Sr. Agathonica considered harsh physical punishment a requisite of a chaste life, which was purposefully designed to keep wayward young women from falling into the clutches of Satan, or a handsome young suitor, and bondage to sordid and sinful desires. After many long years of beatings she had endured from the previous Mother Superior – “Sr. Golgotha,” the novitiates had mockingly called her – she began to savor penance as a way to seek relief from carnal desires by substituting them with pain. Kneeling on uncooked grains of navy beans or rice while praying fervently was particularly effective; but she sometimes secretly alternated this practice with flogging herself until her thoughts were again pure. Armed with this arsenal of remedies, she was determined to protect the young wards under her charge – in spite of themselves.

Her night watch was as predictable as clockwork. But she was a full fifteen minutes behind schedule tonight, because one of these spoiled girls had apparently knocked over a plant at the foot of the stairway and had thoughtlessly neglected to clean up the dirt that had spilled everywhere. She would have a stern rebuke for one of these selfish brats in the morning, to be sure. And one of them might even receive the back of her boney hand. She knew for certain it must have been either Ubaldina – the girl from Panama – or her partner in mischief, Catalonia, the lazy little Latin “princess,” as she often called her, or more likely – both of these flirtatious conspirators. The girls had been so defiant and unruly lately, that Ubaldina had to be moved to a room at the opposite end of the hallway from Catalonia’s on the second floor of the dormitory.

But on this night, as she laboriously finished cleaning up the mess before returning the broom and dust pan to the closet, unbeknownst to her on the narrow street behind the convent, a sleek little hansom cab drawn by a single horse with muffled hooves was stealthily easing its way up to the groundskeeper’s gate.

Ames, the Groundskeeper, was full of tall tales and fond of drink, and had tarried long at a local tavern where a friendly, well-dressed stranger generously insisted on buying him pint after pint in honor of some celebration or other – the details of which he had either forgotten or had never learned. Nor was it especially important, given the gentleman’s largesse. But his benefactor had suddenly remembered an important engagement, preparing to take leave of his new friend – but not before buying him one last draught “for the road.”



[Hansom cab, London, Public Domain]

Given to loquaciousness, especially under the influence of strong drink, Ames was only halfway through regaling the crowd with some entertaining tale about his ill-tempered fishwife, never noticing the stranger had vanished along with his Groundskeeper's key. But never having been accused of leaving a flagon of ale unfinished, Ames was determined to continue the story until he delivered the punch line and heard the roar of the crowd.

Moments later, the generous gentleman had suddenly materialized in the handsome cab behind the convent, apparently waiting for something, or someone, as his chauffeur – an equally elegant yet somber black man who might have passed for Baron Samedi – sat stiff and silent in the driver's seat as if frozen in time.

As the clock in the bell tower a few blocks away was striking midnight, a young woman slipped out of the convent through the Groundskeeper's gate that had been unlocked for her, and into the waiting carriage – which then moved off as silently as a ship let loose from its moorings.

Upstairs in the dormitory, as she reached the mid-point between the two wings that accounted for 24 rooms, Sr. Agathonica heard a scream coming from Catalonia's room at the end of the long hallway. The sound startled the old nun, causing her to drop her keys and struggle frantically to find them in the darkness as girls from seemingly every room excitedly poured out into the hallway in a cacophony of sound, all anxiously wanting to know the cause of alarm. With the girls swarming around her like mosquitoes, Sr. Agathonica led the little mob to Catalonia's room and pounded as hard as she could on the sturdy oaken door.

"Catalonia! Catalonia! What is wrong?" she demanded. Catalonia was inexplicably slow in opening the door. And in an unconvincing demonstration of humility, apologized, "Oh, I'm so sorry – it was just a bad dream." On the verge of apoplexy, before Sister Agathonica could respond with a torrent of caustic words she looked around to see the Mother Superior and other nuns marching determinedly up the hall. As she scanned the crowd, it was at that moment she realized only one girl was curiously missing. She hurried down to the other end of the hall to Ubaldina's room and pounded on the door with the mob behind her.

“Ubaldina! Ubaldina! Open this door at once,” she shrieked. After fishing to find the right key, she opened the door and gasped, covering her mouth. As Mother Superior, followed by the other Sisters squeezed into the empty room, they saw the window flung wide open and anchored by the heavy wooden bed was the top end of a rope ladder. Mother Superior leaned out over the window sill and saw that the rope ladder reached the ground. Turning around in rage, she demanded to know from Sr. Agathonica: “What is the meaning of this?” Even the noisy gaggle of girls were suddenly struck silent. The look on Sr. Agathonica’s face was so contorted and such a confluence of confusing and violent emotions, that it was indescribable. And she could only let out a howl.

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~ Coming soon ~

Chapter 2: Seafarers



Early one evening in mid-October 1857, George Augustus Fink Philips, the prodigal son of an old and wealthy New England blueblood family, leaned on the ship’s railing as he watched the sun sink slowly into the sea. He loved watching the sunset on the Caribbean and it always made him feel closer to the Divine than sitting in church.

The Tortuga Light at Fort Jefferson was already twinkling

against the amber rays of the fading sun as the sky began easing into a palette of pastel pinks and violets. George was aboard the ship, *Northern Light*, which had departed Aspinwall, Panama, heading north to the port of New York. After rounding the Dry Tortugas off the coast of Florida, the ship shadowed the coast and was soon approaching Islamorada – a chain of small islands and cays that had served as a way station for the transport of slaves from the Caribbean, New York, Washington, and Charleston. This chain of islands trailing off the southern tip of Florida like the tail of a comet, had served as a rabbit warren of hideouts for pirates and buccaneers for nearly three centuries. Accompanying Philips on this voyage was his 20-year old bride Ubaldina Cazorla Philips and their eight month old daughter, Delores. [Above: *Northern Light*, 1851, public domain]