

Cardinal Mahony

A Novel

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*“Daring ideas are like chessmen moved forward.
They may be beaten, but they may start a winning
game.”*

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

“The best way to predict the future is to invent it.”

—Alan Kay

Chapter One Snatch

“¡Hola!” said the woman. She was smiling, but there was something about her sudden presence – and the two men with her who were not smiling – that troubled Cardinal Mahony. In the summertime, there were hikers aplenty here in the High Sierra. Now, on this snowy morning in early November 2008, no one on this trail, and no one back at the cabin. The cardinal’s aide and his visiting seminarians had schussed off on their Nordic skis only an hour ago and left him quite alone.

He tried not to look frightened. Since the woman had greeted him in Spanish, he judged it was politic to speak Spanish, too. He said, “*Buenos dias*—I think.”

He eyed the men. They were wearing white ski jackets, Levis and cowboy boots, as she was. One of the men carried something that looked very much like his own Loyola-Marymount University sports bag. The other shouldered a large, folded wood-and-canvas contraption. A stretcher?

“We won’t hurt you,” said the man with the bag. “Much.” He gave the cardinal a karate chop to the Adam’s apple that sent his glasses flying, then smothered his face with a terry-cloth towel soaked in chloroform. The other man and the woman caught him going down. In an instant, the two men strapped him to the stretcher and trotted him off. In less than five minutes, they came upon the small frozen lake that served as a winter landing pad for Mahony’s own helicopter. Soon, they were easing him into the cabin, cuffing him and tying him down in one of two large recliner chairs behind the pilot seats.

Roger Michael Mahony had raised few eyebrows some years ago when he persuaded the three Southern California billionaires to give him a \$395,000 blue-and-white Hughes 500D four-passenger jet helicopter. How else could the shepherd of more than four million souls get around the huge Los Angeles basin? Certainly not in his mere Mercedes. Certainly not on the creeping I-10 in the morning. Certainly not on the Pasadena Freeway at any time of the day or night. He’d been taking chopper lessons. Indeed, he already had his first-class license by the time he took delivery of the whirlybird on the rooftop of the Bank of America building at Third and Flower and soared off with his three benefactors on the machine’s maiden voyage.

“There it is,” he told the land developer, the banker and the mayor. “Your city – and mine – the city of Our Lady Queen of the Angels.” He added a salient fact. “And almost every one of the hospitals in this city has a heliport on the roof.” Mahony began using these landing pads, and LA’s 287 pastors soon grew used to his unannounced appearances at their early Masses – or their late sumptuous dinners. Steve Lopez of the *LA Times* wrote, “The cardinal has given a whole new meaning to the word ‘skypilot.’”

Now as the chopper headed south, the woman was taking the cardinal’s blood pressure and monitoring his heart. “You gave him too much dope, Rodrigo,” she said to the co-pilot.

He shrugged. “He’s a big man. What? Two hundred and twenty pounds?” He smiled. “Without his scarlet robes?” Mahony, of course, wasn’t in his scarlet robes now. He was wearing a black nylon jogging suit and a pair of white tennis shoes.

They were crossing the Mexican border unchallenged when the cardinal finally opened his eyes. Still groggy, his vision still out of focus, he asked the woman, “What are you doing?”

“We’ll be landing at a private airport in a few minutes,” she said. “To refuel.”

“And then where? And why?”

She eased his glasses on his ears, but did not respond. She was not surprised to find he spoke with such authority. A lesser man might have been cowed by the capture, the chloroform, the cuffs. But she realized this was a man who had learned long ago how to take charge, ask questions, get things done. Now, as the archbishop of Los Angeles, he headed a half-billion a year corporation. His net worth as corporation sole of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles came to \$15 billion, most of it in commercial and residential real estate that had been left to the Church by rich widows from San Marino and Bel Air and Rolling Hills Estates. He had built his own \$193 million cathedral. Even bound as he was, he had a certain dignity. His question, she thought, deserved an answer. She raised an eyebrow to Rodrigo, inviting him to tell the cardinal.

“No,” the co-pilot said to Mahony. “No questions. You will know soon enough. You can have some water though.” He reached under his knees and passed the woman a small plastic bottle. She unscrewed the cap, apologized to the cardinal for the handcuffs, and held the water to his lips.

He nodded and took two sips, also swallowing his anger at being told “no questions.” He said, “I need my pills.”

She nodded and reached for the Loyola-Marymount bag. “We were in your cabin. We brought along your pills. And your toothbrush. And some other things.” She paused, then smiled. Mahony noted her very white teeth. “Even your Macintosh Powerbook.”

Nice of them, he thought. His anger rose, to think how well they’d planned everything. They even knew enough to grab his Prozac.

When they stopped to refuel at a landing strip in the middle of a saguaro forest, the woman strode to the airport manager’s shack and fiddled with a TV. “Nothing on the news, yet,” she said to Rodrigo when she came back to the chopper. “I checked CNN and Fox and Televisa, too. Tomàs, do you think we have done it?”

As the chopper rose, the pilot said, “I think we did! I think we can relax now.” He offered cigars all around. He got no takers. “With luck,” he said, blowing a big smoke ring, “no one will know the cardinal is missing until at least midnight.”

“Why even then?” asked Rodrigo.

“Because the cardinal’s an e-mail freak. His half dozen minions expect his ‘midnight missives.’ If they don’t get ‘em, they will know something is wrong. But they cannot confirm that until they get the Mono County Sheriff’s Office to check his cabin.” He turned in his seat and regarded Mahony. “Isn’t that right, Your Holiness?”

The cardinal tried to rise higher in his seat, furious that these, these terrorists had pulled off this caper with such ease, even more furious to think they knew so much about him. Finally, the anger he’d buried burst forth. “Fuck you!”

“Did you hear that, Rodrigo? María? His Holiness said, ‘Fuck.’”

They said very little after that. The fall light had almost faded by the time they faced into a clearing in the middle of a mountain jungle. They’d eaten only a few tortillas

and some cold, refried beans for lunch. María whispered to the cardinal, “The worst is over. Soon, we will be eating warm rabbit stew and washing it down with some red wine.”

He shook his head. “I cannot believe this.”

Tomàs turned and said, “Believe this: the worst is not over. For us, maybe. But not for, uh, not for you.”

They blindfolded him, then untied him and removed his handcuffs. He uncoiled his six foot three inch frame and made his painful way down the narrow ladder to the ground while the rotors were still whirling overhead. Tomàs, Rodrigo and María each had a Jeep waiting for them, with two debriefing officers in each of them. A new set of escorts took Mahony in hand, pushed him into a rusting Chevy Suburban, and followed the Jeeps up a rocky road as the setting sun cast the jungle in an orange glow.

They served the cardinal some stew in a small metal bowl, but he did not have the pleasure of María’s company, nor any red wine either. He ate alone in his cell, a windowless room in a corrugated metal shack, furnished with a cot, a blanket (no sheets, no pillow), a chair, a table, a pitcher of water and a chamber pot. When he finished eating by the light of a stubby candle, he said to his guard, “I have no cup.” The guard did not understand. “*Una taza*” said the cardinal, in Spanish and with a gesture. The guard reached into a small pack and produced a paper cup.

“*Gracias,*” said the cardinal.

“*De nada,*” said the guard.

Mahony drank, not worried that the water might make him sick. He was already sick, with worry and with fear. For the first time in perhaps twelve hours he prayed, but his prayer was the reproach of Jesus on Golgotha, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Before he went to sleep, he was allowed a visit to the latrine ravine. The guard watched him, then gave him a sheet of newspaper to wipe with.

Danny Zapien, the veteran sheriff of Mono County, led off CBS News in the Morning, live from Bridgeport at 4 a.m. California time. “We took our own chopper up there near the cardinal’s cabin,” he said. “We didn’t find the cardinal. We didn’t find his chopper either. But we found lots of footprints in the snow where the chopper was parked on Mirror Lake.”

A spokesman for the U.S. Border Patrol in Tijuana named Gordon Proud told another CBS reporter in San Diego, “We had reports – late yesterday morning—that a blue and white helicopter – probably a Hughes 500 D—crossed the border at Calexico. We didn’t tell officials from Homeland Security until about an hour ago – when we heard that the cardinal – and his blue and white chopper – was missing.”

In Washington, D.C., Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates faced a press gang outside his home in Georgetown. “Yes, if terrorists have taken the cardinal to Mexico – or wherever—this is definitely a federal case, but until we find out who they are and what they want, we cannot tell you a thing. Yes, the president has been informed. Yes, we have notified Los Pinos. No, we have no information yet about any demands.” A reporter asked Gates why he thought Mahony had been taken by terrorists. “Who else?” he said.

He'd surmised correctly. By seven p.m., Katie Couric was reporting on the CBS Evening News that the kidnapers were asking \$49 million ransom. Couric waved a sheet of paper. "They chose the cardinal's favorite form of communication – e-mail – to make their demands, and sent copies to every news organization in the world. They say they don't care how the cardinal's friends raise the money. They just want forty nine million for his release. But the major mystery tonight is this: who are these terrorists? And where do they come from? We have Jim Foster standing by at the NSA."

At 7:05 p.m. in Washington outside the National Security Agency, Foster told Couric, "Katie, I've been closeted all afternoon with the government's Internet experts, including men from the FBI and the CIA. All they can tell us is that the kidnapers' message came from Malaysia. But that site in Southeast Asia was probably the last in a chain of many intermediate Internet providers. It may take many hours or even days for computer experts to climb back up that chain."

Shortly after 10 p.m., Bill O'Reilly was confiding to viewers of The O'Reilly Factor on the Fox Television Network, "This may well be a hoax, folks. We know the cardinal is missing. But we have no proof that he's been kidnapped at all – other than an e-mail message from Southeast Asia. One of my sources close to the District Attorney in Los Angeles tells me the DA was on the verge of indicting the cardinal for obstruction of justice – for his fifteen-year cover up in the case of Father Michael Baker, a convicted sex predator. So I am wondering if the cardinal didn't stage his own kidnapping, just to buy time – and gain some sympathy."

CNN had the most explosive newsbreak of the night. John Allen was reporting from the Vatican—nine in the morning in St. Peter's Square. "CNN has learned," Allen said, "that an organization called the Shining Path – that's an outfit in Peru that hasn't been heard from in years – is putting Cardinal Mahony on trial. They are putting Cardinal Mahony on trial! No, I cannot tell you my source on this, but it is someone very high up on the third floor of the Apostolic Palace."

Suzy Walker, at CNN's news desk in London, asked Allen, "What for, John? What are they putting him on trial for?"

"Ah, this is the weird thing, Suzy," said Allen. "My source inside the Vatican—he got an e-mail note sometime after midnight here – my source says they are trying Cardinal Mahony for his sins."

"John, what exactly does that mean, 'for his sins?'" She giggled. "For the four cardinal sins?"

At first, Allen was too giddy over his own scoop to get the joke. "Umm, Suzy, we'll just have to wait and see." Then he got in synch with Suzy—and corrected her. "Four cardinal *virtues*, Suzy. Prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. *Seven* capital *sins*. Pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth. The sins that cry out to heaven for vengeance are willful murder, sodomy, oppression of the poor and defrauding the laborer of his wages. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, there are two kinds of *sin*, mortal sin and venial sin, or two kinds of *sins*, private sins and social sins—"

"John, we have to move on."

“Uh, okay, Suzy. Well, we’ll just have to wait and see how they go after Cardinal Mahony, very holy guy as far as the pope is concerned. But you know what? Ha ha. I’d like to cover the trial.”

A little more than three hours later, Fox Television News had a follow up from its Rome correspondent who had gained his camera crew’s admission to the pope’s regular Wednesday morning audience inside St. Peter’s. They captured the pope’s words and the pope’s anguish.

“The whole world groans at this latest assault on the Body of Christ, which is the Church,” said the pope. His voice quavered, but his words were clear. “We are all sinners. All the children of the Church are constantly on trial for their sins – but before God. Men cannot judge. Terrorists cannot judge. When misguided souls – no doubt they are men of good will—think they can snatch, yes, snatch a cardinal of the most holy Catholic Church and take him off somewhere and put him on trial – we must pray for them, and for our suffering brother in Christ.”

On one of three television screens in the Oval Office, President George W. Bush had been watching the pope. He picked up a phone and punched a single yellow button. ““Bobby? Let’s get the Special Forces revved up. We gotta rescue that cardinal from the terrorists. You know anything about this outfit called Shining Path?”

In the morning, the guard unlocked the cardinal’s cell door and María entered with a smile and a tray bearing a pot of steaming coffee, a basket of tortillas and an open jar of honey with a spoon standing in it.

“¡Hola!” she said, and though that was the same word she greeted him with on that trail in the High Sierra, he smiled back, grateful to see the only person who had been halfway nice to him during his forced trip to – wherever they were. From the time they spent in the air, he guessed they were in southern Mexico or Central America. He was still wearing the jogging suit he was captured in—minus the jacket, for even at eight in the morning, the air was warm. María wore no shoes and a soft, revealing, royal blue jersey mini-dress. As she stood over him, setting the tray down on the table, one of her perfect young breasts brushed his forehead. He caught his breath.

She said, “They told me to tell you that you will have a day to prepare your defense. Tomorrow you go on trial.”

“Defense? Trial?” Mahony pushed his chair back. “What’s the charge? Who’s the judge? Where’s the jury?”

María remained standing. There was no second chair. “Drink your coffee before it gets cold,” she ordered. “There’s some warm milk in the small pitcher.”

He was still fuming. But he did as he was told. He fixed himself a *caffè latte*, no sugar, and bit into one of the tortillas. “Not bad,” he said.

“Even better,” she said, still standing behind him, “with some of that honey.”

He tried the honey and told her she was right. It was better.

By the time he was finished with his coffee, he felt a little calmer. “Tell me more about this trial?” It was less an order than an invitation.

With a dancer's grace, she dropped cross-legged on the floor in front of him. "You will learn more about that at your arraignment this morning. The judge will tell you."

"And who's the judge?"

"Our *presidente*, Iván Díaz."

"*Presidente* of what?"

"We call ourselves *Para los otros*. We are men and women for others. We are followers of Jesus, who came to set us free."

"Free from what?"

"Not *from* anything. *For* something. Free to be all that we can be. So we can be men and women for others."

"And in Mexico, you cannot be all you can be?"

She waved her hand to cancel his reference to Mexico. "Nice try. I cannot tell you where we are right now. And we are not *from* Mexico. Not all of us. We have come together from all of Latin America – and from California, too. I am from East LA."

Mahony knew a good many people from East LA, and María didn't sound like East LA. People from the Mexican neighborhoods in Los Angeles draw out the *ell* and the *ay*, and this woman didn't have that drawl.

"You have a school here?"

"Not a school so much as a ... training camp."

"Training for what?"

"For the revolution."

He sighed. "Hasn't Latin America had enough revolutions?"

"This is a different kind of revolution. We aren't training to fight with guns or bullets." She bit her lip. "We're fighting with the most subversive thing there is: new ideas."

"New ideas?"

"Ideas that will help the people of God rise up and win their own salvation – in this life, as well as in the next."

He smiled. "You have an idea gun?"

"Well, duh? We use the media, We use one of your favorite mediums, the Internet. We use radio. We use television. We have our own satellite. Or, rather, we rent space on one."

"You can afford that?"

"We can afford it if our *presidente* can make some deals today."

"Deals?"

"To sell the feed on your trial tomorrow."

"The feed?"

"We are offering your trial, live, to the world's major networks – to CBS and ABC and NBC and Fox and CNN and the BBC and Skynews in Asia. They can do their own commentaries. We hope they will bid on it, like they do for the Olympic Games."

Mahony gasped at the audacity of that idea. "Why, you're using me!"

María gave him a level look. "Yes, I guess we are. As your people have been using my people for centuries."

"My people? What do mean?"

"Your own father?" she said. "Does he not qualify as one of your people?"

“What about him?”

“On his chicken ranch in the Valley, he used undocumented aliens did he not? Paid them substandard wages – off the books? No benefits? No Social Security?”

The cardinal said he didn’t know about that. “I was just a kid then. I was in the seminary.”

She said, “It doesn’t matter. Everyone was doing it, just the way everyone has always done it, starting with Columbus. Then, in the seventeen hundreds, the Anglos came in from the East and cheated the *Californios* out of their Spanish land-grants. And in the twentieth century, Okies homesteaded the Central Valley and hired Hispanics to pick their strawberries, their oranges and lemons, their grapes and their artichokes and avocados. We try to call the process by its right name: exploitation.”

Mahony’s lip curled. “So it’s all about money?”

“Money’s not important? How could you build your two hundred million dollar cathedral without it?”

Mahony had to admit. This young woman was sharp. He changed the subject. “Ideas are one thing. Violence is another. How can you people justify the violence?”

“What violence?”

“Kidnapping? You stole my chopper?”

She laughed. “We borrowed it. We’re just borrowing you, too. To make our point.”

“Your point, my neck.” He squeezed under his chin. “I still have a sore throat. You could have asked me – nicely – to go on your TV show. I’m pretty good on TV.”

“Nice doesn’t win audience share. Live action does. And not your phony ‘Reality TV’ action either. Yesterday wasn’t phony. We were playing for keeps. If the U.S. Department of Homeland Security wasn’t filled with idiots. They had choppers that could have brought us down.” She paused for a breath. “I don’t know if I should tell you this, but you will find out sooner or later anyway. We have asked for some big ransom money. For you, we are demanding forty nine million.”

He whistled, pleased to think someone might pay \$49 million for his freedom. “Who have you been talking to? Karl Rove? Dick Morris? James Carville?”

“We have clever people of our own.”

“I’ll say.”

María stood. It was almost time to go. “This isn’t agitprop theater. It’s real. The whole world will be watching this trial. Because the whole world will know we’re not competing for – cash prizes, or an all-expenses trip to Paris. We are putting you and the whole damn Catholic Church on trial.”

“Now you’re going too far! What has the Church done?”

“Nothing. That’s the whole point. Words, words, words, words. Lots of say so. Very little do so. If Jesus visited the Vatican today, he would throw up. What you guys have done to his message!” She paused and her voice rose a notch. “What your priests have done to little kids!”

The cardinal flinched, but said nothing.

She glared at him. “The bishops should all lay in a supply of millstones, instead of paying a bunch of smart lawyers to hide you behind the statute of limitations.”

“Millstones?”

“Luke seventeen, two? If you harm my little ones, better that a millstone be tied around your neck and you be drowned —“

“Okay, okay,” he said, interrupting her. “I get it ‘—in the depths of the sea.’” Mahony reddened, to think this young woman could quote Jesus so tellingly, and that he needed her to give him the very verse that counted most. As far as we know, Mahony reminded himself, these were the most violent words Jesus ever uttered. And he saved them up for pedophiles. All of a sudden, he had to go. Was it the coffee? Or was this, this mere woman, scaring the piss out of him? He looked at his watch. “What time is it here, María? Do we have to go to my arraignment now? If so, can you tell the guard I have to make a stop before we move on?”