

The Comfort Shack

Mark Souza

Copyright 2011 by Mark Souza

Smashwords Edition

Thank you for downloading this free ebook. You are welcome to share it with your friends. This book may be reproduced, copied and distributed for non-commercial purposes provided the book remains in its complete original form. If you enjoyed this book, please tell your friends, share it and return to discover other works by this author. Thank you for your support.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to any actual person, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Table of Contents

[Story](#)

[The Comfort Shack Tidbits](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Upcoming Titles](#)

[Connect With Me Online](#)

[Second Honeymoon Excerpt](#)

The Comfort Shack

By Mark Souza

The mini-van pulled to a stop in the nearly empty parking lot. Its headlights lit a sign mounted to a rustic stone rampart. *Welcome to Historic Fort Cavendish*. A family of four crawled out, stiff and weary. They unloaded the van and followed a concrete walk through a set of gates dragging their roller-bags.

“Mom, why can't we stay in a real hotel?” the oldest daughter complained.
“Shut up, Jenny. We're here now and this place has meaning to your father.”

Inwardly, Leanne Brown didn't want to spend a cold night in a drafty pre-Revolutionary-War fort any more than her daughter. But the decision had been made. Her husband, Stu, had ancestors who had lived there during the eighteenth century. To him this was a romantic adventure, a reconnecting with his past. Letting Jenny's mutiny go unchecked would only invite a spat. She clenched her teeth and hauled her bag dutifully, bringing up the rear like a ramrod driving reluctant cattle down the trail.

Light spilled from the office windows casting intersecting crescents of light onto the walk. Panes of wavy glass flecked with bubbles bracketed a heavy door crudely fashioned from hand-hewn timber. Inside, functionality trumped historical accuracy. Overhead fluorescents cast a pallid glow over a heavy wooden reception desk fitted with a computer. The office walls had been finished with sheetrock and painted a cheery yellow.

Behind the counter, a woman looked up from her terminal screen when the door opened. She was young and pretty, and had a ready smile. Hair black and shiny as a starling's eye flowed over her shoulders down to her waist, boldly framing a heart-shaped face with high cheekbones and bronze skin.

"Hi, you must be the Brown family. I'm Ellie, welcome to historic Fort Cavendish. We've been expecting you."

Stu gawked at the girl with a stupid grin on his face. Leanne shot a quick elbow to his ribs to bring him back to Earth.

"Uh, yes, that's us," Leanne said.

"We have you in the Commandant's Cottage. After you've settled in, would you like the tour?"

"Sure," Stu said.

The girls rolled their eyes. They remained silent though their posture sagged like snow burdened willows. Under other circumstances Leanne would have taken them to task, but it was late, everyone was tired, and it was enough that they didn't complain.

The receptionist picked up on their reluctance. "I promise to make it fun," she said. "Let me show you to your cottage."

She led the Browns out the door and across the courtyard on a lit cobbled path. Suitcase wheels clattered as they bounced over the joints in the walkway and no one spoke. A stone structure jutted from the interior bulwark. Ellie held the door while the Browns shuffled inside.

The Commandant's Cottage was better accommodation than Leanne expected. A wood fire burned in the hearth of a massive river-rock fireplace. Oil lamps lit the space. The front room had an upholstered sofa and two leather club chairs, antiques, though not old enough to be authentic to the fort by a long stretch. A short hallway led to a bathroom with a tub-shower combination and modern plumbing. Leanne was glad to see some concessions had been made in the name of guest comfort.

On either side of the hall were bedrooms. The one on the right was furnished with a pair of twin beds and an antique armoire. The girls shuffled in and chose beds without a fight. The room to the left was nearly identical in size, and furnished with a queen-size bed. The mattress was smaller than Leanne was used to, but for one night, it would do.

"I'll give you a few minutes to get settled and we'll start the tour," Ellie said. She closed the door and left them. The Browns unpacked.

Leanne answered the light rap at the door fifteen minutes later. Ellie stood on the stoop holding a set of brass pans fastened to long wooden handles. She set them down next to the fireplace, folded back the lid on one, scooped up embers from the hearth, and clapped the lid shut.

“In the old days, people used these to warm their beds before they climbed in. Your sheets will be nice and toasty by the time we get back.” After placing the bed warmers, Ellie joined the Brown’s in the main room.

“Are we ready?”

The girls looked less than excited. Leanne didn’t feel much enthusiasm either and tried to come up with a graceful way to beg off. It had been a long drive, the hour was getting late, and the cottage was warm.

“Who wants to hear about the slaughter of 1759?” Ellie said.

Lisa shot a hand in the air and looked over at her older sister who was trying to decide. Slowly, Jenny’s arm crept above her head. Ellie smiled.

“All right, the tour starts now. Fort Cavendish was built in 1750 by the British to protect Cavendish Bay and the towns nearby from French marauders, and Indian attack. Cavendish Bay was a major seaport at the time. Ships left for England heavy with tobacco, furs and cotton. They returned with supplies like cloth, tea, and gunpowder.

“This cottage was the home of Commander Jonathon Smythe. The only record we have of what happened is from the diary of his wife, Rebecca. The story of the slaughter centers around a prostitute. Is that going to be okay Mrs. Brown?”

The girls, Jenny fifteen, and Lisa thirteen, smirked with their gaze glued to their mother. Maybe they thought she’d squirm at the word or forbid them to hear the story.

“It’s no problem. They’re old enough to know what the word means,” Leanne said.

“I’m related to Commander Smythe on my mother’s side,” Stu blurted. “He’s my great, great, great, grandfather nine generations back.”

The girls looked embarrassed and a little peeved. Initially opposed to the tour, they were now eager to get started and their father was slowing things down. Ellie’s story had two elements they were keen to hear; slaughter and prostitution. And they had their mother’s permission. Leanne was peeved too, but for different reasons.

Ellie smiled graciously. “Wow, what are the odds? A blood relative of Commander Smythe? That doesn’t happen every day. Welcome home, I guess.”

Stu grinned like a smitten schoolboy. Leanne glared. She muttered under her breath, “She’s half your age, moron.” Stu’s eyes slid toward his wife and his expression soured. Her words had hit their target.

“Where did I leave off?” Ellie asked.

“Prostitutes,” Lisa chirped. She looked over at her mother with fretful eyes and a wide grin exposing her braces, to see if she was in Dutch.

“That’s right,” Ellie said. “Let’s head outside.”

Ellie pointed out the various buildings scattered inside the fort and explained how the largest structure at the center, the barracks, housed the enlisted men. The cottages along the walls were assigned to officers and their families on the basis of rank. With one exception. Ellie pointed out a small building next to the Commandant’s Cottage.

“That cottage held prostitutes. The army recognized that since the enlisted men were mostly single and weren’t permitted to have anyone live with them, having ready access to prostitutes might relieve tensions before they came to a head.

“It was a cold winter day in 1759 at about this time of year. The days were short and the nights long. A new girl was brought in, a Native American girl named Libby, and that’s when the trouble began...”

Rebecca Smythe watched the wagon pass through the gates. The buckboard carried supplies up from the harbor. She scaled the wall after hearing the sentry's call of 'ship ahoy' to watch the unloading through a spyglass. The Harbinger set anchor late in the afternoon and wagons off-loaded her cargo, coming and going well into the evening. Rebecca had ordered a hand mirror months earlier and met each wagon as it arrived. Her initial excitement festered into simmering frustration as load after load arrived with no sign of her mirror.

As the wagon drew nearer, she noticed it carried a passenger, a woman. A woman arriving alone meant one thing, a new whore for the *Comfort Shack* - as the men called it. This one was different. She was an Indian. There had never been an Indian whore at Fort Cavendish. And she was young and pretty. Not just pretty, she was beautiful. Unlike the other prostitutes, she wasn't plump, pimple faced, lazy-eyed, or missing teeth. Men scrambled off the wall and hustled across the parade ground to meet the wagon with stupid, leering grins.

"Flies to rotted meat," Rebecca muttered.

The wagon slowed to a stop in front of the supply house. The driver tipped his hat and offered Rebecca a smile.

"Hello again, Mrs. Smythe."

She dipped her head in greeting. "You know why I'm here."

"Yes ma'am and I have it for you."

Rebecca placed a hand over her chest and let out a relieved sigh. The hours of fruitless waiting had seemed longer than the weeks and months that had come before. But the waiting was finally over.

Soldiers arrived at the wagon and crowded around the sideboard. They jostled for position to be the one to help down the new girl. They behaved like idiots. If her husband hadn't been away in town, Rebecca felt sure he would have had them put in stocks or had them whipped. Another group of men arrived to unload the wagon.

"May I have it?" Rebecca asked. The driver reached under his seat and pulled out a parcel wrapped in cloth and bound with string. She could tell from the shape it was her mirror. The driver handed it down as a soldier swung the girl off the seat. Rebecca watched in horror as the girl's leg clipped the mirror and it tumbled from the driver's hand. Time seemed to slow. It felt to Rebecca as though she'd stepped outside her body and unable to react. The mirror ricocheted off the sideboard and spun like a windmill till it hit the cobblestones. When she came to her senses she was still screaming the word, "No."

The soldiers backed away. Some returned to their posts. The new girl looked scared and chewed on her lower lip. She bent down, picked up the mirror and timidly offered it to Rebecca. Rebecca snatched it away and snapped the string with a jerk of her fingers. She peeled off the cloth and threw it to the ground. The silver handle was cold in her hand. Intricate filigree decorated the back. She turned it over. A crack extended diagonally across the glass. The girl shifted her gaze from the mirror to Rebecca, a smug grin on her face.

Rebecca's neck tensed with rage, her words came out in a raspy hiss, "It's ruined, ruined." Her tone scattered the remaining soldiers.

"I will pay for a new one," the girl said.

"What is your name?"

"I will pay."

“Of course you will. What is your name?” Rebecca demanded.

“Libby.”

“Your full name.”

The team of horses, whose ears pricked up when the commotion started, now folded them back as if checking for a safe path to retreat.

“Libby, ma’am.”

“Don’t you have a proper name?”

“My name is Libenasequa. White people call me Libby because they have trouble pronouncing it.”

“Do you know how long I waited for that mirror?”

“No ma’am.”

“Four months. I ordered it in September and it’s only just arrived. Can you replace my time?”

“No ma’am.”

“So what do you have to say for yourself?”

“I am terribly sorry. I didn’t mean any harm. A beautiful woman with golden hair such as you has no need for reassurance from a mirror.” The girl spoke softly, her gaze fixed on the ground. From her posture, she looked to be an innocent begging for sympathy. But it was all for show. She was no more remorseful than a cat atop a mouse. Rebecca wanted to slap her.

“Be quiet. I don’t want to hear your self-serving blather. The mirror cost two pounds. Pay me.”

“But I have no money yet.”

“You don’t? Then why did you offer to pay?”

“I will pay you as soon as I can. I promise.”

“The promise of a whore. Now I feel better.” Rebecca turned away from the girl and dug through her purse. She pulled out two silver coins and handed them to the driver. “Place another order with the captain the moment you return to the ship.” The driver nodded.

Rebecca held the mirror to her face. The crack split her brow to cheek, one half angled higher than the other. The effect was grotesque. She squeezed the silver handle until the blood left her hand and the mirror quivered.

“I’ll be waiting for my money,” she said. She lowered the mirror and stormed off for home.

The sitting room window of the Commandant’s Cottage faced the Comfort Shack. Rebecca had no choice but to observe what happened there. Fights had become commonplace since the Indian girl arrived. Libby would take the first half dozen or so from the line and turn away the rest. Rather than bedding down with one of the other girls, most soldiers went back to the barracks and held onto their money hoping to be one of the lucky ones the next day. Jonathan threatened to close down the Comfort Shack if the men couldn’t behave, but confided to Rebecca that he didn’t dare as morale would grow infinitely worse if he did.

The Indian whore left two quid on Rebecca’s doorstep the morning after her first full night on the job. The sight of the coins started Rebecca’s blood boiling again. It was a reminder she’d not have her mirror until spring.

Libby had made herself invisible, though the signs of her presence were unmistakable. A line of men congregated in front of the Comfort Shack as soon as the sun set. Libby refused to work during the day and slept until nightfall.

A plague hit the fort that week. Rebecca hadn't seen the bodies; however her husband, Jonathon, spoke of it. He had a gift for description that made her feel she had been beside him at the time. Two men had died. The illness struck quickly. Men who seemed healthy the day before, were found dead the next morning, one in the parade ground, the other at his posts on the wall. Dr. Harker had seen nothing like it. He assumed it was an unknown disease of the New World. The corpses had puncture wounds on their throats, but Harker assured they were not significant enough to cause death. In fact, the wounds didn't appear to have bled at all. The doctor surmised the men were already dead when the punctures were inflicted, and were likely caused by some sort of nocturnal animal.

One evening, Rebecca sat in her rocker knitting a sweater. A flash of red at the door of the Comfort Shack caught her attention. If it had been the dingy jacket of an enlisted man, she wouldn't have noticed. But the color was vibrant and clean, it screamed out like a signal fire. It was the coat of an officer.

She didn't sit at the window to spy. In the afternoon, the location offered the best light for her knitting. The man appeared wary and nervous in the jaundiced glow of the porch lantern. It was while he checked to see if anyone was watching that Rebecca saw his face. It was Lieutenant Bennett, Beatrice Bennett's husband, stepping inside. She was so distracted waiting for Bennett to leave, that she had to back out two rows of ruined stitches. Half an hour later, the door cracked open. After a moment's hesitation, the lieutenant sauntered out making a beeline for his cottage as if nothing had happened.

The weight of Bennett's secret pressed down on Rebecca like a platen. Should she tell Beatrice? Would the woman ever speak to her again if she did? Would she even be believed? She hated being put in this awkward predicament. It was all the Indian's fault. Trouble had followed her from the very day she'd arrived.

Rebecca eventually told Margaret Adams, the Quartermaster's wife. If she hadn't confide in someone she would have burst from the strain, and Margaret could keep a secret. Within a week, the only wife in the fort who didn't know was Beatrice Bennett. Afterward, things went oddly quiet when Beatrice was around.

Rebecca felt badly at first, but it did bring the rest of the wives closer than ever. Rebecca warned the others of everything that had happened since the Indian girl arrived. They listened, but paid no heed. Millicent Potter thought the real issue was Beatrice's decision to sleep in separate beds. Harriet Harker had heard from her husband that three more men had died of New World plague, for a total of seven.

During the morning, temperatures plummeted. Snow fell, first as sparkling dust, then later in large flakes that looked like goose down falling from the sky. By evening it was calf-high, and still men stacked up in line in front of the Comfort Shack. They actually came running, trying to beat each other for the first places in the queue.

Rebecca didn't even pretend at her knitting as she rocked in her chair. She left the lantern unlit while she watched, as it made it easier to see outside from the darkened room. The men were taken inside in turn. That night's number was five. The rest were dismissed two hours later, disappointed. Shortly after the line dispersed, a figure slipped from the shadows onto the porch of the Comfort Shack, and rapped lightly on the door. It

was Captain Potter, Millicent's husband. Rebecca noted the russet-skinned hand that slipped out from the open door, curled around Potter's neck, and drew him inside. There was no mistaking who he was there to see.

When she told the wives at Harriet Harker's cottage, their faces turned grim. They took her seriously this time. It was as if their eyes had been opened and they realized a snake had entered the garden, a snake that could take what was most dear to them at any time.

"What do we do?" It was Harriet Harker who asked, but the eyes of all of them fell on Rebecca. She quickly realized *we* wasn't *we* at all. It was Rebecca. Rebecca was married to the Commandant, and the Commandant had ultimate control of the fort. He alone had the power to force the Indian whore out. And Rebecca shared his bed and had his ear. Responsibility fell to her to remedy the problem.

Rebecca left feeling worse than when she'd arrived. She had gone to share her burden and warn her friends. Instead, her burden had been doubled. She slogged across the parade ground through the snow, her feet soaked and stinging cold, wishing she had a pair of high boots like the soldiers. The blanket of snow that had twinkled in the moonlight the previous night, so smooth and pure, was now a trampled, filthy eyesore.

As she neared the chapel, she decided to stop in to pray for guidance and strength. Inside she spotted Dr. Harker sitting in the back pew with his head resting in his hands. He was a tall man and lean. He looked as if he'd have trouble holding his ground in a stiff wind. But Jonathon said he was the finest doctor he'd ever met. "Is everything all right?" she asked.

Harker jolted at the sound of her voice, his face pallid and creased with worry. When he recognized her, he settled back into the pew and nodded. "I'll be fine."

"You look as though something is troubling you."

He gazed at her a moment as if considering, and then let out an exasperated sigh. "I apologize if I have caused you concern." He stood to leave.

"Has it anything to do with the New World plague?"

Dr. Harker cocked his head and stared at her like an inquisitive bird. "You know of it?"

She nodded. "My husband and I speak often."

Harker remained silent as if digesting what she'd said. When his face relaxed, Rebecca knew he would confide in her, as he likely reasoned she would hear it later anyway. "Another man died last night, and I fear it is no plague. Disease spreads. One sick man begets two. Two begets four. Four begets eight, and so on. This has not happened. It's been the same week after week. One victim each time. It doesn't spread as it should. The victims are healthy the evening before, and dead in the morning. And always two or three a week. Never more. Never less. Therefore, I conclude it is not a disease, and fear the devil is in our midst. I have come to pray," he said, "and I advise you to do the same."

Rebecca felt uneasy the rest of the day. She waited for Jonathon to come off duty. The snow began again. It fell softly and straight down as if the Earth was holding its breath. It fell so heavily Rebecca could barely make out the Comfort Shack. She stacked more wood on the fire so the cottage would be warm for her husband's return.

Jonathon looked weary when he arrived home. He remained quiet through dinner. She hoped he'd bring up the latest news, but he didn't. "I saw Dr. Harker in the chapel. He told me there was another death."

Jonathon glanced up and swallowed his food. "Yes, we found another plague victim up on the wall. It appears he died during his watch."

"Dr. Harker says he no longer believes it's a plague."

Jonathon dropped his fork and wiped his mouth with his napkin.

"Harker should keep his opinions to himself."

"Do you know he believes the devil walks amongst us?"

"Yes, I know. I am also a God fearing man, but I am not entertaining this foolishness. All that is unfamiliar is not necessarily the devil's work."

"It's the Indian. I know it is," she said. Jonathon's face tensed into a frown. Rebercca continued. "Nothing has been the same since she got here. The men fight. Soldiers are dying. Married officers are sharing her bed."

Her husband's brows shot upward in surprise, "What?"

"I know it's an offense and I don't want to cause trouble for anyone, but I've witnessed it with my own two eyes."

"These are serious charges. The men involved could be court marshaled and sent to the stockade. Is that what you want?"

"No. I just want you to send that whore away. You have the authority to do it."

"On what grounds?"

"I told you."

"Because men fight and some are dying of sickness?"

"Because the fort is falling down around your ears. The Indian girl is at the center of it. She is a pox that threatens all of us."

Jonathon stood and tossed his napkin on his plate. "You have had it out for that girl from the moment she broke your mirror. It was an accident. Let the matter go. I do not like this aspect of your character. The Bible says to turn the other cheek. It's good advice." He strode off to the bedroom and left Rebecca alone at the table.

By the time Rebecca finished the dishes and dressed for bed, Jonathon was already asleep. She blew out the lantern and crept under the blankets beside him. It was then that she sensed he was awake.

She spoke in a low voice, "I have been considering what you said. Perhaps you are right. I think I need to forgive and let bygones be bygones."

Jonathon rolled over and kissed her forehead.

Rebecca woke during the night shivering. She turned for Jonathon but the bed was empty. A dull silvery light glowed through the curtains and lit the room in shades of gray and black. She put on her housecoat and slippers, and made her way to the front room. Jonathon wasn't there. She checked the sitting room. The snow had stopped and a fresh white blanket shimmered under a full moon, its smooth billowy surface broken by a single track of footprints leading from the cottage to the Comfort Shack. She slumped into her rocker, woozy and unable to breathe. *This just couldn't be.* Her Jonathon was a man of honor. He would never... There must be an innocent explanation. She could think of none.

As she rocked, moonbeams played on the raised filigree of her broken mirror. She plucked it off the bureau and turned it over to see her own angry image twisted into that of a gorgon. It was the whore's fault, all of it. The mirror was heavy in her hand, its handle as icy as she felt inside.

Movement drew her attention out the window. Jonathon stood on the porch of the Comfort Shack holding the Indian girl tight in his arms. He leaned down and kissed her with a passion he hadn't shown Rebecca in years. Rebecca narrowed her eyes to slits and clenched her jaw until she thought her teeth would crack. She stood and hurried to the bedroom. She stripped off her housecoat and slippers, and slid into bed. When Jonathon entered, she pretended to be asleep.

Rebecca waited until Jonathon snored. When she felt sure he was sleeping soundly, she slinked out of bed, put on her housecoat and slippers, collected the mirror, and crept out of the house. She was careful through the snow to step in Jonathon's footprints and leave none of her own on her way to the Comfort Shack. Snow bunched on her slippers and wedged inside. Her feet were soaked and throbbled with cold by the time she reached the porch. A board creaked when she climbed the stairs. She paused. The house remained still. She stalked to the door and pressed her ear to it. She heard nothing. She reached for the door handle and hesitated. There was one thing to check first. She turned the mirror in her hand and brought it down hard onto her palm, edge first. She winced. The mirror definitely had heft and was solid enough to make a serviceable weapon.

She took a deep breath and reassured herself that it was no sin to kill a servant of the devil. She reached for the door handle and it jerked from her hand. Libby stood in the doorway, her dark eyes glistening in the moonlight. She scanned Rebecca top to bottom.

"Mrs. Smythe, what are you doing about at this time of night?" Libby looked down at the mirror and smirked. "You weren't planning to dash my brains out with that, were you?" She smiled and reached for the mirror. She curled her fingers over Rebecca's hand. A tingle radiated up Rebecca's arm and she gasped. Libby pinned her against the wall. She was so strong. Rebecca couldn't move. Libby looked into her eyes and smiled. She pulled Rebecca inside and closed the door.

The fetid air of the Comfort Shack stunk of smoke and sex. Libby led Rebecca to a bedroom furnished with three small beds. Sleeping women occupied two. The third, beside the window, sat empty with the blankets drawn back. Libby seized Rebecca by the shoulders and pulled her tight. She leaned in and Rebecca felt frozen in place, powerless. Libby's lips touched hers, soft and wet, caressing. Her breath was hot and sweet. Her tongue hungrily probed Rebecca's mouth. Rebecca's knees trembled. Libby lowered her into bed.

Libby's weight pressed down on her. She kissed Rebecca's cheek and then her neck. She puddled her long, black hair on Rebecca's chest and, as Libby shimmied back toward Rebecca's feet, slid her heavy mane down Rebecca's stomach. She straddled Rebecca's ankles and took the hem of her nightdress in her hands. In one smooth motion, she pushed the nightdress up over Rebecca's hips. She glided her hands over the tops of Rebecca's thighs, grasped her knees, and pressed them apart. Gentle kisses danced in slow procession up Rebecca's thigh.

Rebecca wanted to scream, "Stop," but nothing came out. She gazed at the mirror still clutched in her hand. She could end this with one good blow except that she felt paralyzed and unable to move. As Libby's warm mouth advanced, Rebecca felt a heat growing within. Her breathing came fast and shallow. Her chest fluttered. Her head felt light, overwhelmed with conflicting feelings of anticipation and dread, excitement and shame. It was then that she noticed the image in the mirror. She could see her hips and nightdress, and nothing else but the far wall. She looked at Libby's head between her legs and glanced back at the mirror. Libby's image was not there.

Libby's lips found their mark. Rebecca moaned. Rebecca's eyes darted to the girls in their beds. *Please don't wake up. For the love of God, don't wake up. No one can know.* Libby's lips caressed. Her tongue stroked coarse and hot. The warmth of Libby's mouth melded with the heat between Rebecca's thighs. Languid strokes increased in tempo. Libby's tongue flicked and darted, circled and strummed. Something swelled inside Rebecca. Her pulse quickened. Her breathing became ragged. She wrapped a hand in Libby's hair and instead of pushing her away, pulled her closer. Blood surged to her head and between her thighs. She inhaled and held her breath. Her scalp began to tingle. The feeling spread down her neck into her chest. She trembled. A shudder bolted through her. It felt as though her head was exploding. The breath she held so tight came out in a long, low moan. She jerked and twitched. Instead of stopping, Libby picked up the pace. Rebecca's body shuddered again. Her legs shot out straight and her back arched. Libby teased with her tongue. Another jolt coursed through Rebecca. Her toes curled until they cramped.

Libby pulled away and Rebecca collapsed into the mattress sweaty and panting. She felt spent and weak. She still clung to her broken mirror. She glanced into the glass and again there was no reflection of Libby. She peered over her stomach. Libby's face was poised between her legs. From her angle she couldn't see the lower portion of Libby's face but she saw her eyes, wide and staring back at her. And from the set of her brows, Rebecca knew Libby was gloating. She'd won. Libby rose up onto her knees with a smug grin on her face and lowered Rebecca's nightdress over her legs.

"I'm done with you now," Libby said. "Go back to your house. Back to your bed and back to your husband. Just remember one thing; you have no power. The power lies with the men, and the men belong to me." She raised an eyebrow and curled her lips into a malicious grin. "And now, so do you."

Rebecca stood on trembling legs. She felt ashamed and angry. But she was so drained that what emotion she felt, she felt at a distance. There wasn't much fight or emotion left in her. Rebecca did as she was told. She wandered to the door and let herself out. As she approached her cottage, she began to cry. She stood sobbing in the snow shivering, her feet burning with cold, until she was finally cried out.

Rebecca awoke the next day to a layer of low clouds that obscured the sun. She felt as dreary as the weather. Jonathon was already up and gone. She lingered in bed wishing the previous night had been a nightmare. When she moved, the twinge in her groin told her it hadn't been. She sat up and realized she still had the mirror clutched in her hand. The clock read almost four. She'd slept most of the day away.

Rebecca had no desire to move and found it hard to think. She remembered the vision of the footprints leading from her cabin to the Comfort Shack; her husband in Libby's arms. She knew that if she did nothing, she would lose him. She went to the armoire and dressed. She stuffed the mirror into the pocket of her coat and draped it over her shoulders.

Outside, day was fast becoming night. Rebecca asked the first soldier she saw where to find her husband. He was with Dr. Harker. She slogged through the snow to the infirmary. Jonathon and Dr. Harker stood over a table. Their backs blocked most of her view. Beyond them, a bare foot pointed skyward, its flesh beyond white. It was tinged blue like glacier ice. She moved closer. They didn't hear her come in. A man lay on the

table naked and dead. It was the first corpse she'd ever seen. Doctor Harker's hands danced and pointed as he tried to explain something to Jonathon.

"I don't know why I didn't see it before. When someone dies and the heart stops, blood sinks to the lowest levels of the body. It's the nature of any liquid. Where the blood pools the skin turns purple. You will notice that that has not happened here. In fact, I found no signs of it on any of the victims. It started me thinking. What happened to all that blood? I started searching for it. There wasn't a drop of it in this man. And there was none where he died. Where did it go?"

"What could do such a thing?" Jonathon asked.

"I don't know. I've never seen a disease do anything like this. There is a legend from Eastern Europe of a monster that drains its victims of blood. It's said to leave neck wounds like those on this man. But the scientific community has dismissed it as a wives tale."

"It's the Indian whore," Rebecca said, "she's a witch."

Jonathon and the doctor startled. Rage contorted her husband's face. She'd never seen him so angry. "Go home, Rebecca. We've been over this. You don't belong here." He took her by the shoulders, spun her toward the door, and gave her a shove. She checked her momentum within a couple steps. The strain of holding back what she begged to say left her quaking. If she revealed she knew he'd slept with Libby, she'd lose him. She left before the temptation grew too great, slamming the door behind her.

From the doorway of the infirmary, she saw Beatrice Bennett hauling water from the well to her cottage. She intercepted her and took one of the buckets. Beatrice was a broad shouldered woman of full proportions, fully capable of bucking her own water, and certainly more capable than Rebecca, yet she freely yielded. Rebecca supposed Beatrice understood the gesture was a ploy to stop and visit. She imagined the awkwardness the other wives felt toward Beatrice with the knowledge of her husband's infidelity had left the woman craving company.

Rebecca waited until they were inside and seated at the table before she told her what she'd witnessed at the Comfort Shack. Beatrice stared at her slack-jawed, her eyes riddled with doubt. Rebecca realized it was easier for Beatrice to dismiss what she said than believe it.

"I saw it with my own eyes. She slept with Millicent's husband too. And last night..." Rebecca hesitated. She tilted her head down in shame. A pair of tears fell leaving dark spots on the tablecloth. Rebecca cleared her throat and continued. "She slept with my Jonathan."

Her admission tipped the scales. Beatrice knew it was true, it was in her eyes. She began to crumble like a dam giving way. Her lips quivered, then her shoulders. Rebecca put an arm around her. "It's all right," Rebecca said. "She's got most of the men under her spell. She's a witch, and I can prove it. I tried to get the men to act, but they won't for obvious reasons. We wives must do something. It's up to us, and I need your help. I need to talk to Millicent Potter. You round up the rest of the wives and meet me at the chapel."

It was dark by the time Rebecca led a puffy-eyed Millicent Potter into the nave. Pungent traces of incense lingered in the air from that day's services. The rest of the wives huddled around the votive candles trying to keep warm, their breath coming out in

white plumes. A light shone from beneath Reverend Jones' door. He was in his room, but not yet asleep. Rebecca kept her voice low. "Do we all know what we must do?"

The women nodded.

"We will drag her out to make them see. We must draw as large a crowd as possible. But we can not let them stop us, and they will try. She has her hooks in them. They will not give her up willingly. Be strong and stand your ground."

The ladies marched out of the chapel toward the Comfort Shack. A line of men waited patiently outside in the snow, hopping up and down and jogging in place to stay warm. Some tipped their hats as the wives approached. Most turned away, embarrassed. The ladies assembled on the porch. When the door opened, Rebecca pounced and dragged Libby out by the hair.

The first soldier in line rushed up the steps and pulled at Rebecca's arms. "I'm next. Be on your way."

Beatrice charged and caught the private from the side. He tumbled across the porch like he'd been hit by a bull. He scrambled to his feet with his fists raised. "Do you know who this is?" Beatrice said, pointing at Rebecca. "Are you willing to threaten the Commandant's wife?"

The private backed off. The line started to disperse. Libby stopped struggling. This wasn't what Rebecca wanted at all. She needed a crowd. Her plan was falling apart. "She's a witch!" she screamed. "A witch!" Some of the men stopped. Rebecca started chanting, "Kill the witch. Kill the witch. Kill the witch." The wives joined in. "Kill the witch. Kill the witch."

Sentries rushed from their posts, muskets drawn. Men trotted from the barracks across the parade ground toward the commotion. The door to the Commandant's cabin opened. Rebecca fixed her gaze on her husband. Jonathon strode toward her, buttoning his coat, his jaw set. "Rebecca, what are you doing? Release that girl."

"She's a witch," Rebecca insisted.

"Stop now. Don't force me to have these sentries take you away."

Rebecca pulled Libby toward the door and jammed her head close to the lantern. She tugged the mirror from her coat and held it to Libby's face.

"She has no reflection," she yelled. "No reflection. She's a witch."

The men gasped. Murmuring swept through the ranks. Jonathon's mouth hung open in disbelief. He pushed through the crowd and stared at the mirror. He passed his hand in front of it and looked again. He pulled Libby from his wife's grip and shoved her toward a sentry. "Put the witch in chains." He searched the crowd and called out for Reverend Jones. The minister stepped forward. "What do we do in a case such as this?"

"She should be marked and then either burned or drowned," Jones advised.

Jonathon gazed at Libby and swallowed. He looked like a man tasked with destroying a precious work of art. "Take her to my quarters."

"What are you doing?" Rebecca begged. "Please no. Don't protect her, she's a witch."

The sentry dragged Libby across the corner of the parade ground to the door of Rebecca's cottage.

"Place her on the table," Jonathon ordered. Two soldiers lifted Libby and pinned her down. Jonathon ripped open her blouse. He stepped to the fireplace and pulled the andiron from the fire.

“Don't,” Libby begged. “It's not my fault. A white man made me this way.” Jonathon hesitated. She continued, “Don't do something you'll regret. Let me go and I'll be yours and yours alone. Please, Jonathon.”

Jonathon lowered the iron and pressed it to her flesh. Her skin bubbled and smoked. The smell of seared meat filled the room. Libby thrashed and bucked. She bared a pair of inch-long fangs. Jonathon scrambled back in shock. Terror registered on the faces of the soldiers holding Libby down. She snarled, “I will never forget. I will hunt you till the end of time.”

Jonathon turned the andiron and pressed down again to form an 'X' on her chest. Libby's eyes narrowed with hatred.

“Take her down to the bay,” he ordered.

The sentries loaded Libby on a buckboard and drove her through the gates. The crowd followed on foot carrying torches and lanterns. They unloaded Libby at the beach, chained her hands behind her back, and filled her pockets with stones. They dragged her into the surf and sat her down. Waves crested over her head. In the troughs between, she screamed and cursed.

“I will come for you, all of you.” Libby denigrated every man she'd slept with by name, shouting details of their personal shortcomings, the stream of bile interrupted only when waves crashed over her head. According to Libby, a child's thumb was bigger than Howard Leeds. And Benjamin Cooper was done before he began, and so it went. The officers remained motionless, eyes looking straight ahead as their names were called.

Some of the enlisted men turned to stare, grins on their faces as weaknesses of the officers were revealed. Some snickered. The wives took their lead from their husbands, pretending they'd heard nothing. But of course they did hear. They heard every word. And from the intimate details the Indian girl spewed, they knew it was all true. Rebecca waited for her name to be added to the list with her head tipped down and her eyes closed. She dreaded the moment the crowd would shift its attention toward her. She would be a social leper afterward.

It took an hour for the tide to come in and cover Libby completely. She never got the chance to castigate Rebecca. The crowd wandered back to the fort. Rebecca joined her husband on the seat of the buckboard and clung to his arm. They didn't speak for the rest of the night.

Rebecca assumed things would return to normal after the witch was gone, *if that's what she was*. However, things seemed far from normal. She supposed the past could not be unwritten, but with time, she and Jonathon would move past this. They all would.

Rebecca awoke the next morning after a fitful night of sleep. She turned for Jonathon. He was already gone. It was seven o'clock on Sunday and he hadn't had breakfast. Rebecca dressed. She stepped outside into fresh snow. The parade ground was empty. She checked the walls. No sentries marched watch. The gates stood open and the buckboard was missing. The fort was empty. Maneuvers? On a Sunday? But there were no tracks in the snow.

Leanne looked into the glowing eyes of her girls as Ellie told the story. She had them waiting on her every word. Leanne didn't know that Ellie had omitted the seduction of Rebecca Smythe for the sake of her children.

"Rebecca Smythe walked down the road to the harbor," Ellie said. "She feared the worst. Was Libby dead? Would her body be where they'd left it?"

"The tide was out when Rebecca reached the shore. Standing in formation facing the beach, up to their necks in water, were three-hundred dead soldiers, faces the whitish-blue of glacier ice. Standing at the front as if leading his troops, was their Commander, Jonathon Smythe."

"Is that a true story?" Lisa asked, her braces glimmering in the floodlights of the parade ground.

Ellie nodded, "It's all true. Are you glad you took the tour?"

The girls jerked their heads up and down. "What happened to Rebecca?" Jenny asked.

"She returned to England carrying Jonathon's child. Years later, she returned and settled in Virginia."

Leanne interrupted, "Okay girls, it's late and we've imposed on poor Ellie long enough. Back to the cottage. I want you ready for bed in fifteen minutes."

The girls frowned.

"It's no imposition. I had fun," Ellie said. The girls smiled expectantly hoping Ellie could sway their mother.

"Go," Leanne ordered, "it's past your bedtime."

The girls grumbled as they trudged back to the cottage. Leanne watched them until the door close. She turned back to Ellie.

"Thank you so much for the tour. That was wonderful." Her gaze drifted to the 'V' of skin above where Ellie's blouse was buttoned, and then up to her eyes. "I noticed your scar. You like to put a little of yourself into the story, don't you? Was there really an Indian prostitute at the fort?"

Ellie brought her hand to her chest and fingered the X-shaped scar. She smiled impishly. "You caught me. Sometimes I can't help myself."

"I guess it doesn't really matter," Leanne said. "It was very entertaining and the girls loved it. Thanks again. Good night." Leanne glanced at her husband. Stu was ogling Ellie like a schoolboy with a crush. She nudged him. "Say good night, Stu."

"Good night," he said.

Ellie returned to the reception desk while Leanne led Stu to their room.

By morning, the fire had burned itself out and the air inside the cottage had turned chilly. Leanne awoke wrapped tightly, burrito-style, inside the comforter. Sunlight brightened the room. Poor Stu must have spent the night blanket-less and shivering. She glanced over. No Stu. His side of the bed was empty. She called for him. The girls poked their heads into the doorway. "Have you seen your father?"

The girls shook their heads. Perhaps he'd gone for a jog. He could definitely afford to drop a few pounds. She showered, dressed, and packed her things.

Stu still hadn't returned and her concern shifted to fear. *Where was he?*

She went to the reception desk. A man with 'Robert' printed on his name tag was busy restocking a display of brochures. "Hi, I'm Leanne Brown. My family is staying in

the Commandant's Cottage. You haven't by chance seen my husband Stu, have you? He's missing.”

Robert smiled meekly, his expression a mix of sympathy and helplessness. Leanne knew the answer before he spoke. “No ma'am. I haven't seen anyone.”

“How about the girl who works nights, Ellie? Could you ask her?”

He stepped back; an incredulous look on his face. Was it too big an imposition to make a simple phone call? Her husband was missing. Didn't he get that? “Ma'am, we don't have a girl working nights, nor anyone named Ellie on staff.”

“You must be mistaken. She checked us in, and gave us a tour. She's Native American, maybe twenty-five, pretty with a scar on her chest.”

“No ma'am, nobody like that.” Robert slid behind the counter and typed something into the computer. “Did you say your name was Brown?”

“Yes.”

“We show a reservation for Brown. You reserved the Commandant's Cottage for last night, but never checked in.”

“It's wrong. It's got to be.”

“I'm sorry ma'am. Do you want me to call the police?”

Leanne nodded. A dreadful thought occurred to her. She didn't want to acknowledge it was a possibility, yet something told her to check. She left Robert punching numbers into the phone and pushed open the door. She stood in the cold of the parking lot to get her bearings. At the end of the lot, she found a trail leading down to the beach. She hoped she was wrong.

The Comfort Shack Tidbits

I have always been fascinated by the way the past ripples into the present. How atrocities from centuries ago boil over into war despite generations of peace. It's as if echoes of evil can never be silenced. The horror is that it's so often true, as witnessed by the genocide in Serbia and Rowanda.

I wanted this story to have that unstoppable, Carrie White's hand thrusting up from the grave feeling. The Comfort Shack originally appeared in the Pill Hill Press anthology *Fem Fangs*. The theme for the anthology was *strong female vampire characters*. I took it a step further and made all the female characters in this story strong.

At first I wasn't interested in writing a vampire story. The call came too close on the heels of another vampire story I'd written, and I thought I was vampired out. Then I saw the cover artwork and knew I had to get a story into that anthology. It had the distinctive look of Alberto Vargas, and was reminiscent of racy detective and men's magazines from the forties and fifties.

About the Author



Mark Souza lives in the Pacific Northwest with his wife, two children, and mongrel beast-dog, Tater. When he's not writing, he's out among you trying to look and act normal (whatever that is), reminding himself that the monsters he's created are all in his head, no more real than campaign promises.

Upcoming Titles

My novel *Robyn's Egg* will be released in the spring of 2012

A collection of my short stories, *Try 2 Stop Me*, will be released in September of 2012

Other **FREE** short stories coming soon:

Cupid's Maze

Murphy's Law

Appliances Included

The Diary of Horatio White

Second Honeymoon

Connect With Me Online:

My Website: <http://www.marksouza.com>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/#!/souzawrites>

Second Honeymoon Excerpt

By Mark Souza

Jack Duncan grumbled as he cinched his robe. The knocks at his door as people stopped to offer condolences were becoming tedious. A stream of familiar faces had filed into his home to deliver an awkward moment and a story about how wonderful a woman Marianne had been, and to comment on how she'd be missed. He'd had his fill of pity

and Marianne stories by the end of the first day. Privacy is what he wanted most – that and the insurance payout.

A stranger stood at the door smiling. The man looked unremarkable: average height, middle aged with a slight paunch, meaty face, curly salt and pepper hair. He wore a navy suit, red tie, well shined black shoes, and carried a matching briefcase. He looked like a salesman.

After opening the door a crack, Jack asked, “Do I know you?”

The man’s dimples deepened. “Mr. Duncan, I’m Tova Burke with Gemini Insurance. I’m visiting to discuss your wife’s policy with us. May we speak?”

Jack noticed the blue panel van at the curb with GEMINI painted across the side in large gold letters. He glanced inside his house then at Burke. “Can I get dressed first?”

“Of course.”

Jack closed the door just as Burke started to raise a finger. Perhaps it was a precursor to the question, “May I wait inside?” Better to just shut the door in the man’s face than have to answer *no* and appear even ruder. He rushed to the master bedroom at the back of the house. While he pulled clothes from the dresser, he admired the form in his bed. Half covered by a sheet, Abby Meacham lay sprawled out spread-eagle taking up most of the king-size mattress. Her hair sprayed a flaxen arc across the pillow. Her proud buttocks pressed high against 700-thread-count, Egyptian cotton. And what a magnificent backside it was. A tiny grin played on Jack’s lips before he lightly smacked Abby’s rear. She jerked and moaned.

“Get up sleepy head,” Jack said, “The insurance man is here.”

“Wha’?”

“No time for questions, darling. It’s payday. It won’t look good if he finds you here. You need to skidaddle.”

Abby sat up and stretched. “What time is it?”

“Just get dressed. We can talk later.” Jack pulled on a pair of jeans and buttoned them closed. He topped his ensemble off with a polo shirt.

“You’re getting your money – so soon?”

“Maybe.” Jack found Abby’s clothes in a heap on the far side of the bed and tossed them in her lap. “I need you out of here before I let him in. Slip out the back and either hide in the garage, or use the back alley to walk home.”

“I don’t like all this sneaking around,” Abby said as she slipped into her clothes.

“Don’t worry. Once I cash the check and sell this dump, we can go somewhere nice and start over. No more sneaking around. I promise.”

“Vegas?”

“Yeah, why not?”

Jack waited until he heard the soft click of the back door before he ushered in the insurance agent. His time on the front porch had wilted Burke’s dimples. Burke took a seat on the couch and left enough room for Jack to join him. He set his briefcase down on the coffee table and released the latches. From it, he pulled a stack of documents and placed them down.

“I’m so sorry to hear of your loss. What happened, if I might be so bold?”

“No, it’s okay,” Jack said. The story, his subdued tone, stern expression, clenched teeth; all affectations he’d rehearsed and mastered well before Marianne’s death. It all had to be right each time he told it, whether to first responders, the police, friends,

relatives, or now to the insurance adjuster. He couldn't afford to get it wrong and raise suspicions.

"We were camping. She went down to the river for a dip while I set up camp. The current was strong. I warned her, but she thought she was up to it. Search and Rescue found her body a quarter mile downstream pinned under a tree."

"Tragic, truly tragic," Burke said. Burke's expression mimicked the sorrow Jack had worked so hard to perfect. Jack wondered if Burke, too, had rehearsed. He must have. It was practically a requirement of his job.

"Perhaps I can brighten your day just a little," Burke said.

"You have a check for me?"

Burke stiffened and his mouth hung open. Jack could tell he had caught him off guard. Perhaps the question was a bit crass and a bit callous.

"Check?" Burke sputtered, "There's been some kind of misunderstanding. There is no check."

At first what Burke said didn't register. Then the words *no check* burned into Jack's consciousness like molten lead. "Excuse me for being so blunt, Mr. Burke, but I've been through a lot over the last few weeks. The misunderstanding is on your end, I assure you. I bought life insurance through your company covering both me and my wife. It pays out two-million dollars should one of us die. I know because we both signed it, and I'm the one who wrote the premium checks to your company every month."

Burke frantically shuffled through the pile of documents. "Your wife changed the terms of the policy. Here it is." Burke handed Jack a page from the pile. "She opted for our clone option instead of a cash payout. See, that's her signature and it's dated just weeks before her death."

Jack took the page Burke offered. The writing was Marianne's. He felt the way he had the first time he'd been punched in the face: dazed, unable to react, defenseless, his brain locked in a numb tingle.

"A clone?" he finally sputtered.

Burke responded to Jack's shock with concern. "You didn't know? It's a beautiful gesture, really. No amount of money can replace a loved one, don't you agree?"

"That's not legal, is it, one spouse changing the terms of a policy without consulting the other?"

"It is. See, she only changed the terms with regard to the payout on herself. The terms covering you are unchanged, two-million dollars. No, if she had tried to change the terms regarding your coverage, it wouldn't have been permitted. It sets up a situation that might create incentive for one spouse to take rather lamentable actions against the other, if you know what I mean."

"Is she...," Jack hesitated. He fumbled to straighten his thoughts before locking his eyes on Burke's. "You have to understand, I never thought I'd see her again. This is a bit overwhelming."

Burke nodded. "I understand. Gemini realizes the magnitude of this kind of event. That's the reason for my visit. I have training as a counselor to help with the transition."

Jack gazed at the wall as if he could see through it all the way to the street. "Is she in your van?"

Burke's face broke into an understanding grin. "No, no, that would be a bit much for one day, don't you think? We'll drop her by tomorrow. That'll give you a little time to adjust."

The news did little to relieve Jack's apprehension. His brow remained knotted while he absently kneaded his palms across his thighs. "Will she be exactly the same?"

"Exactly, in fact she'll be the same person."

"And she'll remember everything?"

"Of course. What is a person without their memories? That's not the way Gemini operates. Believe me when I say you won't know the difference."

"Everything, including her death?"

[Back to Table of Contents](#)