

BLIND EYE



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and

In memory of *Kris Hadrits*

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It is the custom of the Roman Church which I unworthily serve with the help of God, to tolerate some things, to turn a blind eye to some, following the spirit of discretion rather than the rigid letter of the law.

~Pope Gregory VII~

The best crime stories are not how cops work on cases – they're about how cases work on cops.

~ Joseph Wambaugh~

CHAPTER 1

At first Detective Jack Bailey thought the old lady's murder was a robbery gone bad. Happened often to the elderly living alone. He told dispatch he was on his way to the scene, flipped on the siren, and sped through the morning rush hour traffic toward White Sox Stadium, near the victim's apartment in the TE Brown complex. Jack was familiar with the address, an eleven-story building for senior residents.

When he arrived at the second floor apartment, a young patrol cop met him at the door. "I'm Jeff Lake, Detective."

Jack grunted a makeshift greeting. "What ya got?"

"The old lady must be eighty or ninety, probably strangled. She's in her bed. No sign of forced entry, the place looks neat, but I just got here." The cop pointed Jack to a door off the living room and kitchen. They entered the bedroom; Jack cringed as an odor of human waste assaulted his nostrils.

A stout white-haired woman lay on her back, arms resting at her sides. She wore a plain long-sleeved white blouse and a calf-length navy skirt, fuzzy pink slippers on her feet. The blue bedspread beneath her was stained with brown blotches, but unwrinkled.

The men looked around, not touching anything. Jack noticed tiny burst blood vessels below the woman's eyes. Looked like nail scratches on both sides of the jaw line with light bruising on the neck.

Jeff straightened his cap. "The neighbor next door said the lady didn't show for their morning coffee. She called management, they went in and found her."

"Vic got a name?"

"Yeah, Sister Anne Celeste."

Jack felt a nudge in his gut. "A nun?"

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"Yup."

"Who'd want to murder a nun? A priest I can see. Most likely was strangulation. Sometimes there's no marks, but these are pretty clear."

They returned to the living room, a compact, functional space with neutral tones and tiled floors with a small kitchen at the back wall. Well designed for old folks. Jack's uncle lived here years ago; Section 8 housing.

"Detective, CSI is on their way. Call just came in."

Jack nodded. "Your first nun?" The cop looked like a high school kid.

"Yeah, but I've only been on the force two years."

"Tell ya a secret, kid. It's my first nun too. Just hope it doesn't become a habit." Jack snorted. "Sorry, bad joke."

Jeff looked puzzled. "Joke?"

"Never mind," Jack sighed. Damn kid was too young for his own good.



Five minutes later the CSI guys arrived and began the familiar routines Jack knew well after twenty-one years in homicide. Almost eighteen months ago he'd moved back to Chicago from a six-year stint in Richmond, Texas, near Houston. He missed the mild winters, but that was all. The sweltering summers damn near killed him. Now that March was here, hope of spring was in the air.

"Jeff, show me the neighbor's place. I'll talk to her, and you canvass this floor. I'll get my partner and a couple uniforms to assist." He punched in a number on his phone.

"Still think the motive was robbery?" Jeff asked.

"No signs of struggle, but need more details." Jack's instinct told him something was off. The nun looked too tidy, lying in repose. He spoke into his phone for a moment and clicked off.

"Partner's on his way."

They stepped outside the door, heading for the neighbor's apartment when Rich, a CSI guy called out. "Hey, Bailey. Wanna

show you something.”

Jack turned back, and Rich held out a piece of white paper folded in half. Jack pulled his gloves from his pocket and took the paper.

“Found this under her right arm by the wrist. Weird.”

Jack unfolded the paper. In blue ink two names were hand printed followed by numbers, one name atop the other. Startled, he read aloud, “Psalm 27:10 and Isaiah 41:17.” Now he was sure it was no robbery. He looked at Rich. “Give me a minute to take a pic.”

Jack sat at the kitchen table and took a photo of the verse with his phone. He glanced at Jeff.

“Keep it under wraps. Don’t want this detail to leak out.” Jack handed the paper to Rich, who headed for the bedroom.

“They’re Bible verses aren’t they?” Jeff asked.

Jack rolled his eyes. “I’ll look ‘em up later. Now, let’s find the nun’s friend.”

After knocking on the door of the nearest apartment, Jack was immediately greeted by a thin, gray-haired woman wearing a red turtleneck, tan pants, and brown sensible shoes.

He flashed his badge. “Detective Bailey, Ma’am. Bridgeport PD. May I come in?” He waved Jeff away to start canvassing.

“Oh yes, officer, I’ve been waiting.” She gazed at Jack, then giggled nervously. “I don’t mean to stare, but you look like somebody on TV or somewhere. Uh, come on in.”

He was used to people commenting on his resemblance to Liam Neeson, fellow Irishman born the same year. Jack was about six feet two, solid build. His thick black hair, generously salted with gray, framed sapphire eyes.

He followed the woman to a brown tweed sofa where they both sat. Same layout as the nun’s apartment. Jack took out his pen and notebook, then asked the woman her name and what happened earlier that morning.

“I’m Ida Swanson, I am good—I mean, was good friends with Sister Anne.” She cleared her throat. “Oh, it’s a terrible shock. I can’t believe, such a good person. Who would do this? These things don’t happen here.” She dabbed her eyes with a white hanky. “It’s

supposed to be a safe place.”

Jack guessed she was in her eighties, but, as his mother would say, ‘well preserved’. Her skin was relatively free of wrinkles, and high cheekbones indicated she was once a pretty woman. “Can you tell me what happened from the beginning, Mrs. Swenson?”

“Swanson,” she corrected, and Jack nodded. Swedish names; all the same to him.

She repeated the story she told Jeff, interrupted with bursts of sobs. She knew Sister Anne Celeste for over twenty years when they both moved into the complex.

“She taught at Nativity of Our Lord Church since the war. That’s World War Two, young man. When she got too old to teach at the school, they kicked her out. That’s what they do, you know. Farm them out to pasture.”

“So I’ve heard.” Jack was familiar with Nativity, where both Mayor Daleys were alumni. “How did Sister feel about that?”

“She didn’t like it one bit. She wanted to be useful, so she went there every day and helped out, you know, like volunteers. She helped with Bingo and in the office, different little jobs, you know how it is.”

Jack didn’t know, and didn’t want to. He’d strayed from the Catholic fold years ago and had no intention of returning. He was the third generation of his family to attend St. Bridget’s Church a couple miles away. It closed in 1990, which caused his mother much wailing and lamenting, but the number of parishes was declining all over. Too bad, but Jack didn’t lose sleep over such things.

“Did Sister Anne Celeste ever mention a problem with anyone, someone at the church or a neighbor?”

Mrs. Swanson frowned and shook her head. “No, never. Everyone loved Sister Anne.”

Not quite everyone, Jack thought. “Did she have family?”

“A niece not too far away, lives in Oak Lawn. They saw each other on holidays. I’ll give you her name. We both kept each other’s family information just in case.”

She stepped into her bedroom and returned with a recipe sized

paper. She handed it to Jack and waited while he copied the information.

Jack closed his notebook, thanked Mrs. Swanson, and handed her his card. "Call if you think of anything else. Even if it doesn't seem like much. Sometimes little things turn out to be important."

They walked to the door. She said, "I hope you get whoever did this. Sister Anne was a wonderful human being." Ida Swanson wiped her eyes again.

"We'll do our best, Mrs. Swanson. Be sure and lock up." He heard the bolt turn and the chain slide into place. She seemed like an astute witness. Nothing flaky about that old broad.

When Jack returned to Sister Anne's apartment, his partner, Karl Scherkenbach, better known as "Sherk", stood talking to two patrol cops.

"Hey, Jack, where do you want these guys to canvass?" Sherk was the poster child for his German heritage; tall, blond and blue-eyed, he exuded an air of health and confidence. Wire-rimmed glasses gave him an intellectual presence.

"Start on the third floor, then the fourth. Another uniform named Jeff is doing this floor. You and me will do the downstairs. Not expecting much; all old geezers."

The two cops headed out. Jack said, "Did Rich show you the note they found?"

"Nope." They sat at the kitchen table. Jack opened his notebook and read the Bible scripture titles to Sherk.

"Ah, the Psalms and Isaiah, comfort books." Sherk punched in keys on his phone. "Here's the first verse. *When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up.*"

Jack raised his brow. "Figured this would be right up your alley." Guys in the squad laughed off Sherk's propensity for quoting Shakespeare and other literary figures; they told Jack to overlook it, that his new partner was basically a good guy. No surprise to Jack that Sherk was acquainted with the Bible as well.

"The other verse is longer," Sherk said. "Should we analyze after we canvass?"

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Jack was fed up with conversations of nuns and Bible verses.
“Yeah, let’s go.”



By noon Jack and Sherk were in the break room at the District Nine Chicago Police Department. The two-story, flat-roofed building is located on Halsted Street, the main north-south road in Bridgeport. Its reddish brown brick walls and drab green entryway and pillars fade into the neighborhood landscape. Sunlight peeked from the clouds, promising a bright afternoon. A typical March day, melting snow, nippy, but a vast improvement from the last few months of freezing-ass cold.

Jack helped himself to coffee and a stale cinnamon roll. He sat across from Sherk at a small table. “No surprise the canvass was a bust.”

Sherk took a swig from a can of Pepsi. “Yeah, maybe the others lucked out. Nothing from forensics yet.”

“What’s your take on the verse?”

Sherk adjusted his glasses. “Obviously, one word is found in both verses, which I’m sure you noted.”

Jack was in no mood for well-intended sarcasm. “Come on, Sherk, get on with it.”

“Okay, okay. The word is ‘forsaken’. In plain English it says when my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will be there for me. The next one from Isaiah means when the poor and downtrodden need help, the Lord will provide for them and not forsake them.”

Jack stared at his partner. “Yeah?”

“Actually, Jack, like much of the Bible, the imagery is beautiful. *When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst –*”

“Spare me, Jerry Falwell, how does it connect to the nun?” Too bad Sherk had to take that literature class in college and annoy everyone in the squad.

“I’d guess the killer was forsaken or abandoned by her, which at

this point, doesn't fit with what people say about the venerable sister."

Jack shrugged. "What about the perp? Some kind religious fanatic?"

"Hard to say. I've never encountered this before. We'll ask our esteemed resident psychologist, Daryl Gray what he thinks."

Jack inched back his chair. "Yeah. Need to check out the nun's church, maybe turn up something. Just my luck, get stuck talking to priests. Why don't you go alone?"

Sherk laughed. "I'm Lutheran; can't do Catholic by myself."

He and Jack had been partners since Jack came on board nearly two years ago. Sherk was smart and meticulous, but Jack preferred working with older cops. He resented taking orders from a kid of forty-eight, but once he settled in, Sherk let up on the mentor role. He still annoyed Jack at times; reminded him of Munch from *Law and Order*. Did people still watch the reruns?



After lunch Jack and Sherk parked in front of Nativity of Our Lord on Thirty-seventh Street near Union. The historic church, one of the oldest in Chicago, was built in 1868 to serve the Irish population, many of whom worked at the nearby Union Stockyards. The church was home to both Mayor Daleys, and Jack's family had entered its portals for the occasional wedding, christening, or funeral. His grandfather was a boyhood friend of the elder Richard Daley, and Gramps told Jack and his brothers many a tale out of school regarding the old pals' past shenanigans.

Jack climbed out of the cruiser and gazed at the majestic Gothic stone structure, its steeple ascending to the heavens. "Been a long time since I darkened these doors."

Sherk beside him. "Quite a history, this place. Was designed by Patrick Keely; that's impressive. It was destroyed in the great fire of 1871 and rebuilt a few years later. Renowned for its extraordinary stained glass windows."

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"Yeah, I've heard most of that lecture, believe it or not." Was there anything this geek didn't know?

Jack opened the heavy wooden door, and they entered the shadowy narthex, rays of light whispering through small high windows. A waxy sweet odor wafted in the air. Jack took a deep breath and ignored the little voice that told him to cross himself with holy water in the marble font ahead to his left.

Sherk's muffled words broke the silence. "Jeez. This is magnificent."

"Yeah, I guess. You can speak up; this ain't a library." Jack looked around and strode into the sanctuary. Rows of multicolored stained glass windows depicting scenes of the nativity, Madonna and child, the Last Supper, and nameless saints, afforded the only light in the vast space.

Sherk pointed to a prominent window near the middle row of pews. "Look at that, the Archdiocese of Chicago coat of arms."

"Yeah, I know, and talk louder." Jack glanced at the translucent red design of a phoenix against a gold shield topped with a crown of green, blue, and red jewels.

Sherk continued in a low voice. "The phoenix is symbolic of the church arising from the ashes of the great fire, as well as the resurrection of Jesus, of course."

"Sherk, you're gettin' on my last good nerve. Let's find a live body to talk to."

They turned toward the sacristy, and a thin young man wearing black jeans and shirt approached them. He smiled. "May I help you?"

The men flashed their badges. Jack said, "We need to see the priest, Father Jim I believe."

The man cleared his throat. "Ah, yes, officers. I assume you don't have an appointment."

"You assume right," Jack said.

"Yes, well, right this way. By the way, I'm Patrick." The guy appeared nervous. Guess he wasn't used to cops showing up on official business in his place of worship.

They followed Patrick to a side exit which led them outdoors to

the education building and offices. They entered, walking past the reception area where two women sat at their desks, heads down, appearing busy with paperwork. When the men reached a closed door half way down the hall, Patrick knocked softly.

Jack heard someone say, "Come in."

Patrick opened the door and led them into a spacious paneled office with two large windows on one side and rows of bookshelves filling the remaining walls. A heavy set older man with a receding hairline sat behind a massive wooden desk. He wore the requisite black long sleeved tab shirt with a white clerical collar. An ornate gold crucifix hung from his neck. He smiled and rose from his chair.

"Well. Who do we have here, Pat?"

"These are policemen, Father." The man looked at Jack and Sherk. "If you'll excuse me, you can introduce yourselves to Father Jim." He closed the door on his way out.

Jack introduced Sherk and himself and showed Father Jim his badge.

The priest continued smiling and offered the men two chairs across from his desk. Jack never felt comfortable with men of the cloth. Didn't trust them. Perhaps from his days as altar boy when old Father Thomas yelled at him for holding the cruet of wine in the wrong hand. Could also be from media coverage after the priest sex scandals emerged in the mid-eighties and reached the national conscience a decade later. At first Jack's mother refused to believe the news stories, but later came to terms with the issue, brushing the whole business under her faux Oriental rug.

Jack sat and crossed his legs. "We need to tell you about Sister Anne Celeste. I'm afraid she was found dead early this morning." He paused. "It appears it was murder."

The priest's hand flew to his crucifix. He gasped. "Holy Mother of God."

Jack sensed something else behind the priest's shocked expression. Wonder what it could be. Jack's imagination?

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