

MEG LELVIS



BLIND
EYE

A JACK BAILEY
DETECTIVE NOVEL

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BLACK ROSE WRITING

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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?"

"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 Isiah, 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?”

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."

"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?

The priest's face shone with perspiration. He wiped his brow. "Dear Lord, how? What happened?"

Sherk leaned in. "She was found in her apartment. Cause of death appears to be strangulation. We'll know for sure within a day or so."

Father Jim gasped, turned pale. He crossed himself and bowed his head.

Sherk continued. "When was the last time you saw Sister Anne Celeste?"

The priest hesitated. "Excuse me, but I need water. Would you care for some?"

The men declined and waited while the priest

etched a bottle of water from a nearby table. He took a gulp. "Ah, let's see. I think she was here yesterday or the day before. We can check with Pat. He manages things. Sister and all the volunteers sign in with him."

Father Jim explained that she helped with various tasks, including weekly Bingo, filing, and answering the telephone. He checked a file that verified she entered the Sisters of St. Anne Convent in Chicago for training and was installed at Nativity of Our Lord in 1950.

Before Jack could calculate her tenure, Sherk said, "Wow, over sixty years. Quite a history. When did she retire?"

The priest paged through the file. "She retired in 1985 at age sixty. She's been volunteering since then, but not every day. The last few years she'd come in two, three times a week for a few hours."

"Slacking off, huh?" Jack's voice sardonic.

Sherk rolled his eyes. The priest said, "Excuse me?"

"Nothing. Tell me about her, Father. What was she like, how did she get along with people?"

"Very friendly, outgoing lady. I started here three years ago, and everyone held her in highest

regard. A compassionate, faithful servant.”

Yeah, look where it got her, Jack thought. “Can you think of any reason someone might want to harm her?” He studied the priest and noted a twitch in one eye.

“Oh, mercy, heavens, no. She was loved by everyone.” He took another swig of water.

Doth the good padre protest too much?

“Father, we’re well aware of confessional privilege, but if you know anything, if Sister—”

“I can’t comment on that, Detective, ah, Bailey is it?”

“Yes, Jack Bailey. I know the law, Father, but sometimes if someone’s deceased—” He figured the priest wouldn’t budge, but why not try.

The priest pushed back his chair. “Are you Catholics, Detectives?” Sherk shook his head. Jack said, “I was brought up in the church, but—” He let the sentence hang in mid air.

Father Jim sighed. “I see. Then you know the sanctity of the priest-penitent covenant.” He eased himself from the chair. “I need to contact Sister’s niece, Molly Winters. Has she been notified?”

“Not yet. Heading that way now.” Jack knew

the clergy often accompanied officers for notification of kin, but he preferred to see the niece without the padre.

The priest looked at his watch. "Oh dear, I'm afraid I'll be late for a meeting if I come with you. Perhaps if we hurry." His voice trailed off.

Sherk said, "I'm sure Ms. Winters will need your comfort, Father Jim, but maybe you would prefer to see her when you have time to spare. You'll need to meet with her regarding funeral arrangements, I assume." Good ol' Sherk to the rescue.

"Yes, yes, of course. I'll plan to visit this evening. Oak Lawn isn't that far." Father Jim cleared his throat. "I recollect hearing somewhere that Sister was sort of, ah, a shirrtail relative of a former priest here, oh, maybe in the seventies. Somehow connected with Molly, but can't recall how." He scratched his head. "The old brain can't remember a lot of things these days."

"A lot of that going around." Sherk said.

Jack scoffed. Still in his forties, his partner wouldn't know squat about aging.

They said their goodbyes to Father Jim and exited the building. Jack wondered if the priest's

memory was as muddled as he'd claimed. Bet he remembered plenty.

"Don't see much sense in talking to church people at this point," Jack said.

"I agree. Sister was a saint. Loved by one and all. Likewise, with the niece no doubt."

They climbed into the cruiser and headed for 90 south, then 94, exited on 20 and drove west to Oak Lawn, a middle class suburb a few miles south of Midway airport. Traffic wasn't heavy yet; just wait an hour or two.

Jack parked in front of a neatly kept one-story red brick house with white trim. The neighborhood was over forty years old, established with well-maintained yards and plenty of trees. Random patches of snow clung to the grass, but spring was around the corner as Jack's mother said. At least the sun was out. Nice to wear light weight jackets and ditch the parkas, gloves, boots.

Sherk rang the front doorbell. A dog yelped from inside. They waited. A voice called out, "Who is it?"

"Bridgeport Police." They held up their badges at the peephole.

The door opened halfway, and an attractive, fifty-something woman looked anxiously at them. "Oh God, is it Aunt Anne? She lives in Bridgeport."

Jack said, "Molly Winters?" "Yes, that's me."

"We need to talk to you. May we come in?"

She let the men inside and shooed a medium-sized tan dog of blended heritage down a hallway. "Go lie down Bruno. It's fine." The mutt plodded off.

Jack said, "I'm Detective Bailey, this is my partner, Detective Sherkenbach. We won't take much of your time."

Slim with light brown hair, the woman wore fitted jeans and a lightweight yellow sweatshirt. She led them through the entry into a tidy living room furnished in neutral tones. The words, 'nice ass', passed through Jack's brain.

Molly gestured toward the sofa. "Did something happen to my aunt?" She sat in a beige arm chair next to the sofa. Wringing her hands, she leaned forward.

Jack said, "I'm afraid we have bad news, Ms. Winters." He waited a couple seconds. "Your aunt was found this morning in her apartment.

She couldn't be revived. We're very sorry."

Molly's hand flew to her throat. "Oh my God! A heart attack? Did she fall?"

Sherk leaned toward her. "Ms. Winters, I regret telling you this, but your aunt appears to be the victim of a homicide. That is, right now, we think she may have been— ah— strangled."

Molly gasped. "What? You can't mean—she was—somebody killed her? My aunt? That can't be." She held her face in her hands and sobbed quietly.

This was never easy. Worst part of the job for most cops. "Can I get you some water?" Jack asked.

"No. No thanks." She stared into space. "I can't believe it."

Sherk told her details of what happened earlier. They sat in silence.

Jack said, "I know you're still in shock, Ms. Winters, but can you think of anyone who might have wanted to harm your aunt?"

"Oh, God no. Everybody loved Aunt Anne. Everybody." She paced back and forth between the furniture. "Maybe a robbery? Someone broke in?"

“It didn’t look like forced entry,” Sherk said. “When did you last see her?”

“Um, about two weeks ago for my mom’s birthday. They were sisters, Mom turned eighty-two last month. She lives in Beloit, Anne and I drove together, stayed the weekend.” Molly stopped pacing and sat on the edge of the chair. “Oh, God, how will I tell Mom—murdered? This is like, like the twilight zone or something.”

“You sure you wouldn’t care for water?” Sherk asked. “I’ll go in the kitchen and—”

“No. Hell, I need a drink. I shouldn’t, but—” She got up and turned toward the kitchen. “Want to join me?”

Jack was tempted, but knew better. He and Sherk waited while she disappeared in the kitchen. A minute later she returned with a glass of red wine. “Wish I had something stronger.” She sat and took a hefty drink.

“Did you notice any change in your aunt’s mood, state of mind lately?” Jack asked.

“No. She was always cheery, maybe slowing down a little, but she’s, ah, was eighty-seven.” Molly took another drink. She spoke slowly. “But, now that I think about it, after dinner last

Christmas she and I were talking alone. I'm a lapsed Catholic, but she never poured on the guilt. Anyway, I said I should confess my sin of gluttony for stuffing myself, can't recall the details, but she said something about herself and confession. Damn, I can't remember."

"So you think the topic of confession pertained to her directly?" Jack's interest piqued.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do. I know I kidded her, saying, 'Oh, Anne, you've never done anything wrong in your whole life. What, do you confess you burned the toast?' Then she looked at me, kind of a sad smile. She said sometimes not doing something— She closed down after that, like something unpleasant drifted through and then she was back to her old self."

Jack started to rise. "Thanks, Ms. Winters. Here's my card. Call if you think of anything else."

Sherk said, "We spoke with Father Jim. He'll be contacting you about arrangements."

Molly led the men to the door. "Thanks. He was good to Anne. She was the oldest volunteer there."

The men said their goodbyes and strode

toward the cruiser. "You thinking what I am?"
Jack asked.

"Think so. Sin of omission. What did the good
Sister fail to do?"

The next morning Jack awoke groggy and unsettled before the alarm buzzed. Images of Jack's fifth grade teacher, Sister Petrina, infiltrated his brain, part of fractured dreams where sheep grazed and priests leaped out of confessionals. Were the damned nightmares snaking their way back in his life? He'd done well since his move from Texas; couldn't face a recurrence of PTSD symptoms. He knew he wasn't cured, but still—Boone, Jack's large yellow dog of questionable ancestry, lumbered across the floor and nuzzled against the pillow.

"It's okay, boy, might as well get up." Jack thought about Sister Petrina as he headed for the

shower. Mean old battle ax; a firm believer in corporal punishment, and the sting of her ruler on Jack's knuckles remained etched in his memory. At least his nieces and nephews were spared the rod of present-day nuns, lucky kids.

The phone rang as he emerged from the shower. Who'd call this early except to deliver bad news? He wrapped a towel around his waist, retrieved the phone from his nightstand, read the caller ID. Crap. He tapped on speaker mode. "Hey, Ma. What do you want so early?"

"Jacky, is that any way to talk to your old mother? Listen, I read about the nun in the paper. Do you know anything about that? Sister Anne Celeste. You know, I think I remember her. She was about my age." His mother finally took a breath.

"Yeah, Ma, got wind of it yesterday." At times he wondered why he'd moved back to Chicago.

"How did it happen? The paper didn't give a cause of death. It said—"

"Ma, we don't know yet. I gotta go. Some people have to work, you know." He finished toweling off.

"Don't get smart with me, mister. I've worked

damn hard my whole—”

“I know, I know, fingers to the bone and all that. I’ll see you in a couple days for dinner like we planned. Have a good one, Ma.” He hung up before she could utter another word. He imagined her “humph” as she hung up. At this hour, he visualized her dyed henna hair still in curlers, bathrobe tied around her ample waist.

Half an hour later, Jack arrived at the station. He shivered as he stepped from his car. A whiff of burning logs drifted into his nostrils, reminding him of promised snowfall. The air felt frosty, the sun hidden behind puffy clouds. Jack heard forecasts of possible late winter storms, but with April two weeks away, he hoped for the best. He’d had enough winter with long days of no sun. No wonder folks were depressed. Next winter he’d consider vacationing in the south. Not Texas. Too many ghosts remained in Richmond. That door must stay closed.

He greeted the gray-haired cop at the front desk and made his way down the hall toward the bull pen, a large drab room which housed detectives, patrol cops, CSI guys, and office assistants. Rows of interior windows alongside

the door were covered halfway with open mini blinds, enabling everyone in the hallway to gawk inside and see who was where. This annoyed Jack and his colleagues; felt like a fish bowl.

An aroma of fresh coffee floated through the air as he reached his desk and grumbled good morning to Sherk, whose desk faced Jack's. Cops of various shapes, sizes, and gender stared at computer screens or bustled about, phones buzzed, keyboards clicked.

"Morning, Jack," Sherk said. "The sarge wants to see us about the nun case. Any further ideas before we grace her with our presence?" Sergeant Daisy LePere ruled over her detectives with an iron fist, a fact Jack's co-workers warned him about his first day on the job.

"Figured the bitch in heels would wanna bust our balls about it." Jack sat and rearranged stray papers on his desk. "Couple things about the case first. I think we need to find out if there's been allegations against priests at the Sister's church back in her day. And who was the shirrtail relative the padre mentioned? We'll ask Molly Winters after the shock wears off."

"Yeah. As we said yesterday, Sister Anne may

have been part of a cover up.” Sherk rose from his chair. “Let’s go face the dragon lady.”

Jack reached for his stained White Sox mug. “Need coffee first.”

He trudged to a table beside the far wall and filled his cup, then they headed toward Daisy LePere’s office down the hall from the bull pen.

The door was open, and they walked in. “You wanted to see us?” Sherk asked idiotic questions at times.

LePere looked up from her desk. “Good morning, Detectives. Close the door, have a seat.” Her smile looked forced. Tall, blond, and willowy, she appeared to be in her mid-thirties. Although her blue eyes and high cheekbones were eye-catching, staff members found her offensive and difficult; no one admitted she was, by traditional standards, a pretty woman.

The men obeyed orders and sat in two chairs across from her tidy glass-topped desk. The room was small, but uncluttered. Pale yellow walls held framed certificates along with photographs of lions and cheetahs from a safari vacation with her father, according to the grapevine. She allegedly acquired the sergeant’s position through family

connections. Jack didn't know details, just hearsay. Why a rich bitch would want the job was beyond him.

"What's your plan with the nun?" Old bag didn't beat around the bush. She wore her usual uniform of tailored dark pants with a white long sleeved shirt, a colorful silk scarf draped around her neck. A coordinated jacket hung on the coatrack by the door.

Sherk said, "We'll talk to Sister Anne's niece again about a possible family connection to a priest, review surveillance tapes from the apartment, inside, outside, and get the tech man to research former priests at Nativity for allegations." Jack preferred to let Sherk do the talking when they dealt with LePere. Didn't trust himself to keep a lid on.

She squinted. "You think this might be priest abuse?" She looked at Jack. "Cat got your tongue, Bailey? What's your theory?"

Jack shrugged. "Could be abuse connection with the Bible verses. We're checking financial, phone, the usual records, but not expecting anything remarkable." He didn't tell the battle ax more than he had to. Times like this he longed for

his old job in Texas where he ran the investigation.

“Okay, go back to the church. Talk to more people. Squeeze the priest on anything she kept personal, a possible confession, even though he’ll claim confidentiality. Do the job you were trained for.” She waved them toward the door.

Jack felt his blood pressure rise. They did this crap yesterday.

Useless busy work. Typical of the broad.

Sherk said, “All right, we’ll revisit the church, but I don’t think it’ll—”

“I do the thinking around here, Sherkenbach.” She turned to her computer. “And next time bring me some evidence.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Sherk tipped an imaginary hat.

“Have a nice day, Sarge.” Jack hoped she caught the sarcasm. “It’s Ms. LePere to you. And close the door behind you.”

On the way to their desks, Sherk said, “Don’t let her get under your skin, Jack. Not worth it.”

Jack growled. “One of these days, Sherk, pow, she’s flyin’ to the frickin’ moon.”

Sherk sniggered. “Come not between the dragon and her wrath.” Jack harrumphed.

“*Hamlet*, I suppose.”

“*King Lear*, and I misquoted. It’s actually ‘his wrath,’ not hers.” “Whatever.” Jack turned on his computer. “Wanna take another look at surveillance while I get the research goin’?”

“Sure, and then we can go back to the church per the dragon’s orders.”

Jack rose and headed across the room where a thirty-something man sat staring at his computer screen. Gary Calvin was the department go-to computer geek, who worked his magic tirelessly and modestly. The guy was beyond smart; a genius at least.

Overweight with curly red hair, his uniform of choice was raggedy jeans and t-shirts inscribed with pithy sayings.

He looked up as Jack approached. “Hey, Bailey.”

“Got a job for you, Calvin. Top priority. Stop whatever you’re doing.”

“Yeah, you and half a dozen other people tell me the same thing. What is it?”

Jack examined the words on Calvin’s shirt: *I’m Here to Help your Ass—Not Kiss It*. “Great turn of phrase.”

“Ha, my mother gave it to me when I moved back home.” Jack groaned. “Sure hope you’re kidding.”

“I am. Now, what’s beyond your computer skills that you’re bothering me for?”

Jack explained the nun’s case and background needed on the church and priests. “I wanna find any hint of allegations, and if so, who attended the school during the time the priest in question was there. Looking for about fifth to ninth graders.”

Calvin brushed his hand through his wavy locks. “Gotcha. Not my first priest investigation.” He waved Jack to leave and began tapping his keyboard.

Jack threaded his way across the room to his desk. He called Molly Winters and asked about her aunt’s family relationship to a former priest. He jotted down notes as he listened. “Thank you, Ms. Winters. By the way, has Father Jim called?”

He paused. “Good. I see. Well, keep us posted when you know what time the Mass will be.”

Within ten minutes Sherk arrived and sat down. “Nothing on surveillance, Jack. Tapes ran from early evening to yesterday when first

responders arrived. Suppose the perp could've snuck in earlier. Just the usual looking people. The desk clerk saw nothing."

"Crap. Hoped something might show up. Not the best security, but for an old folks place, it's not bad."

Sherk said, "Nothing was visible on the front street, but the cameras don't cover more than about a fourth of the block either side. Even less in the back."

Jack frowned. "I got Calvin on the priest research. Talked to Molly Winters too. Found out the nun was related to a former priest. Ready for that story?"

Sherk flipped his notebook open. "Go ahead."

Jack read his notes. "Sister Anne's sister is Molly's mom, Lila. She marries a Jon Murphy, whose cousin, Joe, is a priest at Nativity in the seventies some time."

"So Sister Anne's brother-in-law had a cousin who was a priest at Nativity when she was there," Sherk said. "Not exactly kissing cousins. Guess it could be significant."

"Too early to tell. Let's head out to the padre's. A waste of time, but it'll keep the ol' biddy off our

ass.”

Sherk glanced at his watch. “Time for a break. We can check out the new coffee house across the street. Made for cops.”

“You kiddin’ Sherk? I heard that’s a tea room for bored soccer moms.”

“Au contraire. The Jackalope Coffee and Tea House caters to all clientele, including men of our station, no pun intended. Their specialty is a delicacy called ‘puffs of doom cream puff.’”

“Cream puffs? I rest my case.” Jack said.

The men donned jackets from the cloakroom near the door and headed out of the building.

They strolled across Halsted Street and approached the coffee house near the corner of Thirty-second. Splashy colored images were painted on the windows with large lime-green and orange letters above the doors spelling ‘Jackalope.’

“Gotta admit, it doesn’t look like a prissy tea room,” Jack said as they entered the establishment. He was glad only a few customers were seated about. Didn’t like crowds. He spotted a table near the far wall. “Let’s sit there. Be by ourselves.”

The men shrugged off their jackets and sat across from each other. Sherk gazed at the décor. "Quite a place. Sandwiches and soup too, Jack. We'll come here for lunch some time."

Jack pointed to a rabbit-like head with antlers mounted on the wall. "Is that supposed to be a jackalope?"

Sherk chuckled. "Suppose so. Looks like a combination jackrabbit and antelope. You may know the jackalope is a mythical creature peculiar to North American culture."

"Do I look interested?"

A young girl with pierced ears and nose arrived and took their orders of black coffee, a cream puff for Sherk, an apple fritter for Jack.

"Shit. Hide your head," Jack whispered. Sherk turned and looked toward the door.

"I said hide." Jack bowed his head, studying his hands.

"Well, if it isn't my two top detectives hard at work serving and protecting." Daisy LePere and Captain Chub Nesbitt approached the table. Jack looked up; wanted to wipe that oily grin off her face.

Sherk started to rise. "Taking a quick break,

Ma'am. Good morning, Captain."

"At ease, Sherkenbach. We won't stay," LePere said.

"Good morning, Detectives," Nesbitt said. "Don't get a chance to see you very often."

Thank god for that, Jack thought, although Chub Nesbitt was a decent guy; better than LePere. A sturdy black man in his sixties, Nesbitt stood over six feet tall and dressed with impeccable taste. He had a large square face, and was amiable to all.

Jack nodded, wanting to bolt from the place.

"We'll let you get back to work now. I'm sure you're busy planning strategy for your case." LePere gazed at Jack and turned away.

"Good to see you guys," Nesbitt said. He led LePere to a table across the room.

"Simmer down, Jack. I can see your blood boiling." Sherk snickered.

The waitress appeared carrying pastries and steaming mugs of aromatic coffee.

"Mmm, look at this." Sherk eyed his huge crusty blob of a cream puff. He picked it up and bit off a chunk, then returned it to the plate. Thick, yellowy filling oozed from the bite mark

onto the dish. "Ahhh, wunderbar."

"You got the German sweet tooth, Sherk." Jack wrinkled his nose at the ravaged puff or whatever it was, opened his mouth and devoured a chunk of apple fritter.

He glanced at LePere and Nesbitt who were ordering from the waitress. "LePere can't afford calories; the bitch could stand to drop ten pounds." He wasn't about to admit her weight looked average for her height.

"I'll bet she has coffee or tea," Sherk said. "Don't let her irritate you."

Jack grunted. "Just our luck we run into them. This place is too close to work."

"You need to practice your social skills." Sherk took another bite. "Anyway, we should get the forensics report back this afternoon, maybe autopsy if we're lucky."

"Won't be anything new," Jack mumbled. "A waste of time going back to the church too. At least the padre might know when the nun's funeral will be."

"You planning to go?" Sherk polished off his pastry.

"Yeah, we should. See who's there. Perp may

show up.” Jack didn’t buy that old cop’s tale, but who knew?

The rest of the day, a total bust. Father Jim was no help, claimed he knew nothing more than yesterday. Sister Anne Celeste's funeral Mass was scheduled for next Tuesday morning at 10:30. The priest's parting words were, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints."

"Ah, the Psalms," Sherk piped up. "One hundred fifteenth I believe." Frickin' show off.

Father Jim smiled. "Close. One sixteenth."

After they left, Jack said, "Thought you knew your Bible, Sherk." "Yes, I slipped up on that one."

They wandered through the education

building, looking for anyone new to interview regarding Sister Anne. No luck. Each person repeated the same sentiment: the nun walked on water. Eager to leave, Jack hoped he'd seen the last of Father Jim and his church. Then he thought of the funeral. Maybe the case would be closed by then. Fat chance.

Back at the station, Jack and Sherk dined on a makeshift lunch of vending machine baloney sandwiches, Fritos, and Sprite. Seated at his desk, Jack unlocked the bottom drawer, looked around, and twisted the cap off a flask of Jameson. Surreptitiously, he splashed an ounce or two into his Styrofoam cup of soda.

"I saw that, Bailey," a raspy woman's voice croaked behind him. "Gonna get caught one of these days."

He sighed, took a swig. "Want a taste, Velda?"

A stout woman in her sixties sidled up to him. "Too early for me. But let's meet at the pub after work, my treat."

Jack smiled at her. "Got plans today, but sometime real soon."

She rolled her eyes, permed gray curls held rigid. "Sure, that's what they all say."

Dressed in a tan pantsuit which would look attractive on a taller woman, Velda Vatava, known as the general of the bull pen, was confident no one could run the department as well as she. Assertive and efficient, she fancied herself among the brass, even if her salary did not reflect that status. She reminded one and all she was an organizational guru.

"She's a glorified secretary, but doesn't know it," Sherk had told Jack his first day on the job two years ago. "A stickler for rules, but get on her good side, and she'll ignore them. Get on her bad side, and watch out. A couple guys transferred when she made their lives miserable."

Jack remembered the day Sherk introduced her. Jack held out his hand. "Velda Vatava. That's quite a name. What is it? Polish? Czech?" "Gettin' close. Hungarian." She beamed as if proud of her heritage. "Most people have trouble pronouncing it."

"Not me," Jack said. "Actually it's kinda poetic." A word seldom used in his vocabulary.

"Ha!" Sherk said. "You want to hear poetic, tell him your middle name, Velda."

Her cheeks turned pink. "Oh all right. It's

Veronica.”

“Velda Veronica Vatava,” Jack said. “Sounds like a nursery rhyme or something.”

She’d tittered along with Sherk. “Actually, that’s what Sherk first said. Like that children’s writer, Shel Silverstein. Sherk even started writing a poem about it.”

“Velda, we could wax poetic all day, but we have work to do.”

Since then, Jack remained on Velda’s good side, even though she was often a real annoyance. He knew enough to play the game.

Jack took another drink. “Got something important, Vatava?”

She handed him a file folder. “Always important, Bailey. I got this from forensics on the nun murder. Autopsy report should be in tomorrow morning.”

Jack opened the file. Maybe she’d leave if he looked down to read it.

“Have a good one, guys.” She turned and strolled away to bother another cop.

“Here, take a look.” Jack handed Sherk the file. “Tell me it’s good news.” Scanning the report, he said, “Nothing earthshaking for now. They found

a couple partial prints on the nightstand plus synthetic fibers around her shoulders and neck. Fibers and DNA will take a couple days at least. May find a match. 'Hope springs eternal,' Jack."

Jack groaned. "Enough with your Shakespeare." "Alexander Pope." Sherk said.

"Take your word for it." Jack polished off the remainder his sandwich and guzzled his drink. "Perp must've worn paper booties, no footprints. Shows some smarts. Let's see if Calvin found anything."

They tossed their napkins and cups in a trash can and made their way to Gary Calvin's desk. He looked up from his screen. "You're in luck, guys. Found some flaws in the otherwise lily-white reputation of Nativity of Our Lord back in the seventies."

Sherk and Jack, on either side of Calvin, stared at his computer. The geek clacked away, bringing up various lists and charts. "Here we have sex abuse allegations brought against a Father Daniel McGarvey in 1973 and 74. Couldn't find out who instigated them, but he left for greener pastures soon afterward. Died in the late eighties." Calvin glanced at the detectives. "You know they

covered up the sins of the fathers, so to speak, by shipping them off to other parishes out of town.”

“Right,” Jack said. He recalled when the *Boston Globe* broke the story of that city’s priest abuse scandal. “What about former students?”

Calvin reached for a file on his cluttered desk and handed it to Sherk. “You guys can go over these names and ages. No one showed up in the data base, so if your theory stands, your perp doesn’t have a record.”

“Why am I not surprised to hear that? Thanks, Calvin.” Jack followed Sherk to their desks where they each perused enrollment lists during the time of Father McGarvey.

“At least no complaints against Father Murphy, the nun’s distant relative,” Sherk said.

“None we know of.” Jack knew anything was possible.

They skimmed the lists of students, focusing on fourth through eighth grade boys. Jack thought he recognized several last names, even though he attended another Catholic school ten years earlier than these boys. Perhaps familiar names from intramural sports back when Bridgeport was smaller and personal.

Nothing on the lists jumped out at Jack. “We’re spinning our frickin’ wheels, Sherk. I’ve had it up to here.”

Sherk nodded. “I agree. Until we get something from autopsy and DNA, we might as well put the good Sister on the proverbial back burner.”

They turned their attention to other matters, namely their never-shrinking stack of paperwork. Before long, Velda reappeared at their desks.

Jack looked up. “Back so soon?” Thought he was rid of her for the day.

She ignored his question. “Got a call from Nancy at the *Herald*. She wants an update on the nun. The *Trib* and *Sun-Times* called too.” She held her spiral notebook open. “I’m ready when you are.”

“Why the interest from those people?” Sherk asked.

“The murder of an elderly nun is news, particularly when robbery or money isn’t the motive. Besides, generations of Bridgeport kids had their knuckles rapped by her,” Velda said.

Jack informed her they had nothing new to report, and kept mum regarding the Bible verse as

a calling card left by the perp. After she hurried off with her usual air of self-importance, he said, "Thank god."

"You doing okay, Jack?"

Jack was surprised. "Yeah, why?"

Sherk shrugged. "You seem a little irritable."

"That's what I am, Sherk. Nothing new." At least he hoped that was the case.

True, he felt restless lately. He should go out more. His life lacked substance and satisfaction; times like this when a case headed south. What was he missing with the nun? The answer must be in the Bible verse. The bastard's playing cat and mouse. Thinks he's smarter than we are.

Jack couldn't sit still another minute. "I'm callin' it a day, Sherk.

See you tomorrow."

"Sure, Jack. Going to your mom's for dinner tonight?"

"Naw, that's tomorrow. I think she's gonna play cupid, but don't ask."

Jack could easily walk the six blocks home, but in winter he was too lazy. Didn't feel like hoofin' it today, even though the exercise would do him good. Clear his head. Sure hoped he and Sherk could nail Sister Anne's murder since it was gaining press coverage. Closing a big case would look good on his career-ladder record, such as it was.

He lucked out and found a parking spot on the street a few doors from his duplex. Boone yelped when the front door key jiggled in the lock and Jack came in.

"Hey guy, 'wass up?" He ruffled the big dog's fur. He noticed Boone sleeping more lately,

although he always barked and jumped when anyone arrived. No need for an alarm system with him around.

After changing into sweats, Jack spent an uninspired evening drinking Guinness, eating leftover pizza, and streaming reruns of *Inspector Lewis*. He wondered what Molly Winters was doing tonight. Maybe after the case closed, he'd call her. Then again, maybe not.

The next morning passed without incident. After another lunch of vending machine sandwiches and Sprite enhanced with a shot of Jameson, Jack called the medical examiner.

"Right, I'll hold for a minute, but this can't wait," Jack said. He knew the ME was busy with other cases, but the autopsy report on Sister Anne Celeste should be ready by now.

It took Jack awhile to get used to the ME, Dr. Hal Araki, and his Japanese accent. His given name was a mile long with all consonants, so he'd shortened it to something people could

pronounce. The man wasn't big on personality and wore a perpetual scowl on his large square face, dominated by a substantial black mustache. At first Jack struggled to ignore his father's voice in his head cursing the 'goddamn Japs, got us into war.' Now things were better; Jack respected the ME's work and ignored his foul humor.

Impatient, Jack planned to hang up when he heard Araki's voice. "Hal, thanks for answering. Calling about Sister Anne—"

Jack looked at Sherk, pen and notebook ready. "Right, strangulation. What kind of ligature?"

After a minute Jack said, "Okay, Hal. Don't worry, I'll read it thoroughly this afternoon. Thanks. A pleasure, as always." Jack tapped off the phone.

"Think he got your biting sarcasm?" Sherk asked.

Jack shrugged. "Let's say I think we understand each other."

By five o'clock Jack and Sherk had reviewed reports from Hal Araki and the crime lab. Jack was ready to call it quits when Daisy LePere phoned him and summoned the partners to her office.

Her door was ajar; Sherk knocked. "You wanted to see us?"

"Is that a question, Sherkenbach? Come in. Take a seat." LePere wore a pale pink silk blouse with her usual black pants. She sipped from a white mug.

The men sat across from her tidy desk. She gazed at them. "Well, what's new on the nun case?"

Sherk began. "We spoke with Dr. Araki and he verified what we suspected. Sister Anne Celeste died from ligature strangulation. Fibers and bruising indicate some kind of fabric was used, like a scarf or necktie."

LePere nodded. "Signs of struggle?"

Sherk shifted in his chair. "Minimal. Skin cells were under three fingernails. Several short strands of hair not belonging to Sister Anne were on her neck and clothing. DNA from the skin and hair aren't in the database."

"Damn," LePere said. She looked at Jack. "You have anything to add, Mr. Silent?"

Jack had something he'd like to add, but he'd get canned if he said it. "Partial prints they found weren't in the database either, surprise, surprise.

No analysis on the fibers other than the scarf or necktie theory. No other remarkable fibers were found. So there we are, Sarge."

"It's Ms. LePere, Bailey. Why do I always have to remind you?" "Senior memory lapses." Jack smirked. "Or maybe my mother dropped me on my head when I was a baby."

"No comment. Watch your attitude." She rose and started for the door. "Carry on with looking into the nun's history and go to the funeral. The perp may show up. Look for a single man who doesn't look like a friend of the nun's."

Brilliant idea, Sherlock, Jack thought. "Yes, Sarge. Oh, sorry— Ms. LePere." Jack exited the office, Sherk on his heels.

They headed back to their desks. Jack said, "Yeah, we'll look into the nun's history. How does that bimbo keep her job? Oh yeah, family connections."

Sherk shook his head. "She's more to be pitied than censored." "Enough of your Shakespeare. Besides, I don't feel sorry for her." "Actually it's a song by William B. Gray. An old saloon song.

Have you heard of Mae West?"

"Come on, Sherk. I've been around the block a

few times. Once my ma got loaded and did a pretty decent impersonation of old Mae." "Wish I could have seen that. At any rate, I don't think the sarge is a happy woman."

"I don't give a damn, I'm outta here. Wish me luck. Dinner at Ma's tonight."

"Ah, yes. Maybe you'll meet someone interesting."

"That's what I'm afraid of. See ya later." Jack made his way to the coatrack, retrieved his jacket and cap and headed out the building.

He drove down West Thirty-second Street from the station until he reached Aberdeen Avenue six blocks away. He managed to find a parking space a couple houses from his duplex instead of the usual circling the block and down the alley to carports allotted for residents. He missed having a garage like the one in Texas. Well, can't have everything.

Jack's neighborhood was an older working class area with homes, duplexes, and apartments in a row with little space between them. Trees lined the streets and sidewalks, with the residences a few feet away. No front yards here; three steps from the street and you were at the

front doors.

Unremarkable looking, the building was dark brown with tan window trim. Nothing you'd look at twice, but the place had been updated with decent tile floors and attractive kitchen countertops and appliances. He was lucky to find the house, thanks to his brother, Tommy. He not only had been a lead for the Bridgeport detective job, but steered Jack to the residence. He hoped Tommy would be at his mother's for dinner tonight so he wasn't the lone man for the dreaded matchmaker event.

It was still light out when Jack left the duplex and drove toward his mother's house. No snow yet, but an iciness filled the air. Jack turned left when he reached Racine Avenue and headed south. The community had changed since his move to Texas over seven years ago. Like many large cities, enclaves like Bridgeport had become diverse and trendy in certain neighborhoods. The Bridgeport Art Center, a repurposed warehouse, boasted

several galleries and a sculpture garden. Along with upscale shops and restaurants, many residents called the area a “happening place.”

Jack was painfully aware of these sites because of Karen. She introduced him to a world of art and travel when they began dating. The loss of his wife and young daughter, Elizabeth twelve years ago haunted him to this day. Karen would approve of the neighborhood changes if she were — Jack forced thoughts of his wife and child back into the darkness.

He turned left onto Thirty-eighth Street, then hit Morgan and took a right. The Bailey family home was located short of Pershing Road, the southern boundary of Bridgeport. An older neighborhood, its rows of homes and tree-lined streets were well maintained and many had been updated. The three-level house was dark green during Jack’s childhood; now its current façade featured gray siding with ivory window trim. A new white picket fence surrounded the tiny front yard, where three steps led to a small porch. Two gray wooden chairs sat on either side of the shiny black door. Tommy worked hard to maintain the place; always was a good handyman.

Jack parked down the street and let himself into the house with his own key. An aroma of pot roast and onions wafted in the air. "Anybody home? I'm hungry," he called out.

"Coming," a shrill voice answered.

Jack removed his cap and jacket, and before he could toss them on a chair in the entry, Maureen Bailey scurried in. "Not there, Jacky. Hang them in the closet." She lowered her voice. "We have company."

"I thought I was," Jack said.

"Don't start with me. Come on in," she whispered. "And be nice." Maureen's most prominent feature was her bright henna hair, which she insisted was the exact color it was when she was a child. At eighty-eight, she was feisty and active, with few of the aches and pains common to those her age. Medium height and hefty, she took time with her grooming and make-up, which resulted in her appearing ten years younger.

"You look nice, Ma. Who you trying to impress?" Jack took in her forest green turtleneck and long black vest over loose black pants.

"Shush. I said behave." She led Jack through

the entry way by the stairs into the living room. Unlike the avocado shag carpet from Jack's childhood, hard wood covered the sitting and dining room areas. Vintage end tables and an armoire contrasted with updated chairs and a sofa.

An attractive middle-aged woman dressed in a brown tweed pants outfit sat on the burgundy colored sofa. Her dark hair in a layered blunt cut framed her oval shaped face. She smiled at Jack as she started to rise from the sofa.

Maureen said, "Oh, stay seated dear. It's only Jack. Oh, I mean—" She grabbed Jack's arm. "Jack, I'd like you to meet Bonnie Ames.

Bonnie, my son, Jack." Maureen beamed as if proud of her accomplishment.

Jack took Bonnie's outstretched hand and smiled. "Nice to meet you, Bonnie." He could turn on the charm when he wanted to.

"Jack, I've looked forward to seeing you. I've heard so much about you from your mom."

"Guilty as charged." Jack joined her on the sofa a comfortable distance away. He leaned back and crossed his legs. He felt a guilty sense of relief that Bonnie was nice looking, in his opinion

anyway.

Maureen hovered about like a hummingbird. "Would anyone like something to drink before dinner?"

Bonnie said, "A glass of red wine would be nice." "Your usual, Jacky?"

"Yes, Ma."

Maureen scampered away, and Jack felt the burden of awkward silence. Just the two of them. Alone. Damn, he was out of practice.

“Don’t worry, Jack.” Bonnie leaned toward him. “My mother’s the same way. The main reason I agreed to show up is your mom said you look like Liam Neeson.”

Jack waited. “And?” “And what?”

“Do I look like him?”

“I can see the resemblance, but you look older and wiser.” “Actually we were born the same year. He must be wiser though.” Jack shifted on the sofa and faced Bonnie. “Do you live in Bridgeport?”

“Close by. McKinley Park. I’m a coordinator at the hospice clinic branch of Mercy Hospital, a little west of the lagoon. I live a couple miles

north of there.”

Maureen bustled in with drinks. She handed Bonnie a glass of Merlot and Jack a tall mug of Guinness.

“I’ve known Bonnie’s mother for years. Knew her from St. Bridget’s back in the old days before it closed.” Maureen sat in a chair near the sofa. “Oh, what a sad day that was. Mayor Daley was married in that church and—”

“Ma, don’t wanna be rude or anything, but—”

“I know, I know.” Maureen took a sip of Jim Beam from a highball glass. “I won’t bore our guest.”

“It’s okay.” Bonnie smiled. “My mom feels the same way about St. Bridget’s. She found a new church in Palatine when she moved there a few years ago.”

Jack took a swig of beer. He wondered if they’d yak about churches all night. He restrained himself from glancing at his watch.

After ten minutes of small talk, Maureen said, “I think dinner’s about ready. Let me go check the pot roast. Jacky, come and help.”

Bonnie shifted on her seat. “I’ll be happy to help, Maureen.”

“Oh no, dear, you’re our guest. Jacky will just carry things to the table.” Strands of red hair stuck to her forehead. “Whew, it’s warm in here.”

They hustled about in the kitchen; Maureen ordered Jack to carry the pot roast, salad, and bread to the dining room table, all set with white linen tablecloth and napkins. Jack noticed the good silverware surrounded pink depression glass plates, cups, and saucers.

“Why all this, Ma? You’re not entertaining the queen.” “You hush. I told you, be nice.”

Dinner passed with compliments from Bonnie about the lovely table setting and tasty food. She was gracious; Jack thought the meat was overcooked and the potatoes and carrots soggy.

After cherry pie and coffee in the living room, Maureen insisted she wanted no help cleaning the kitchen and Jack and Bonnie should stay put.

Bonnie grinned. “I guess we ought to do as she says.”

“Yeah, no arguing with her.” Jack turned on the sofa toward Bonnie. “You’re sure being a good sport about this.”

“It’s fine. I’ve actually enjoyed myself. Your mom’s very, ah, interesting.”

“Gotta humor her to survive around here,” Jack gulped drained his coffee.

“You know, Jack, my single friends and I started an un-date agreement when we were fixed up with someone. We say we’ll go for coffee or a drink, not dinner, and see if we want to pursue things.”

Jack was confused. “Sorry, I’m not following. Out of practice.”

Bonnie laughed. “It’s a way of appeasing the person who fixed you up, with no pressure to follow through. The point is to see how things go in a non-pressure situation. Then if there’s no call within a week from either party, no hard feelings.”

Jack raised his brow. “Sounds like a Seinfeld conversation.”

“I think it is.” Bonnie drained her coffee cup. “I’ll take charge

here. Let’s meet somewhere for a drink after work, see what happens. Again, no pressure, it’s not a real date.”

“Okay, I’ll give it a shot.” This was weird, but made sense for some reason. “When can you meet at Shinnick’s Pub for a pint?”

“Now you’re catching on. Some time next week works for me.” “Tuesday is Sister Anne’s funeral. We can toast the good nun later on.”

Bonnie nodded. “Oh yes, I wondered how the case was coming along, but I know you can’t discuss it. The paper says still no leads?”

“That’s about it,” Jack said.

“Tuesday sounds good. After work’s fine for me. Should we meet at Shinnick’s around five thirty?”

“Sure, it’s a date. I mean an un-date.”

Jack reached in his pocket for his wallet. He handed Bonnie a card, while she dug hers out of her purse.

“Ah, exchanging phone numbers. That’s nice.” Maureen ambled into the room. Jack suspected she’d been eavesdropping. Was a perfect entrance.

“Don’t get excited, Ma. Too old to give ya grandkids.” “Oh, hush. What will Bonnie think? Talk like that.”

“Don’t worry, Maureen.” Bonnie chuckled. “My mom’s just like you.”

An hour later, Jack walked Bonnie to her car. She took his hand. “No pressure for a goodnight

kiss either. I had a great time. See you Tuesday.”

Jack leaned toward her and kissed her lightly on the lips. “Thanks, Bonnie. A very relaxing time for a mother-match-up.”

They said goodnight and drove home in their separate cars, darkness surrounding them.

Maureen called Jack bright and early to drill him on his impression of Bonnie and their plans to meet. “Ma, keep this up, and I’m moving back to Texas.”

Throughout the weekend, Jack thought about Bonnie. Although she was attractive with a fun personality and sense of humor, he doubted he was ready for a relationship now or maybe ever. He didn’t buy into the ‘meant to be’ crap. His track record with women was dismal. A romantic interest a couple years ago ended in shambles. No one could ever hold a candle to Karen, and it was unfair to compare her to any woman he met.

This week he and Sherk needed to haul ass on the nun’s murder. If the long-ago priest abused a

kid, he'd be old enough now in 2012 to seek revenge. They'd take a closer look at the list of students from Father McGarvey's time. Maybe something would pop out. Can't have the good citizens of Bridgeport afraid to go out at night.

Less than a mile away from where Detective Jack Bailey was pursuing his investigation, a faded thirty-something man named Donald Sowder wandered through the world avoiding attention at every turn. In a movie, he'd play an accountant perhaps, a sales clerk, a computer nerd. His medium brown hair parted on the side lay flat on his small round head. He wore thick wire-rimmed glasses, too large for today's fashion. Average build, average height, he dressed in mostly brown or tan clothes. A witness would be hard pressed to describe him. Just what he wanted. What he relied on.

Donald strolled along Thirty-seventh Street

seemingly unnoticed by anyone, always his plan. Story of his life. No one ever gave him a second glance. He blended into the woodwork, the scenery. Like a chameleon. Invisible.

The mid-morning sun melted the last remnants of snow. Winter's end lifted his spirits, and he felt relieved he wasn't working his tedious job until next week.

He reached Union Street and turned right, stopped, and gazed. There it was in all its glory. He hadn't seen Nativity of Our Lord Church for years. Donald felt compelled to see it today. He was exhilarated, but kept his face void of expression.

The old nun's demise had been easier than he thought. Actually, quite simple. Everything worked according to plan. Last Wednesday night, easy access to her apartment; the girl at the desk bought his story, no problem. He rode the elevator right to the apartment.

After he rang her bell, Sister Anne Celeste called out, asked who was there. Must've looked through her peephole. She said she recalled Donald's name and let him in. His heart hammered when he saw her face. She hadn't

changed except wrinkles crinkled her face; she'd added a few pounds. Did she look guilty? He couldn't tell. Surely she remembered.

Funny how she offered him tea. Like nothing had happened. He declined the tea. She was interested in his life. *What did you do after high school, Donny? I heard you went to college here in town.*

She nodded when he said he'd dropped out of Columbia after a year. He had no direction. No goals. So he attended tech school, got into computers like lots of guys. Been working at Midway Airport for years. Nothing exciting of course.

Her milky eyes penetrated him. How could she forget—unless he wasn't the only one. Oh god. Hope there weren't more. He felt dizzy. Needed water.

Afterwards he barely recalled the words Sister choked out. Asking his forgiveness. Too late. Damage done. He snuck out the apartment unseen. He felt energized, high when he reached his car two blocks away on Wells Street. No one would notice a gray Toyota at the end of a high school parking lot beside several other sedans and

a black pick-up.

A blaring horn interrupted his reverie. "Watch it, asshole," the driver yelled.

Donald jumped back on the curb. Crap, can't afford attention. Must be careful. He wandered along Union past the church. "I got you back," he whispered as he gazed at the stained glass windows of martyred saints glimmering in the sun.

Reaching the next block, he crossed the street to Shinnick's Pub. He could use a pint; too bad they didn't open until noon. He kept walking, turned onto Pershing, and wandered to his car parked alongside a convenience store.

He wished there were a decent movie playing. Getting lost in a dark theater always appealed to him, but nothing other than crappy films these days. Nothing like Poe's stories. The best. 'Nevermore'. Was proud of his collection of Edgar's short stories. The beating of the old man's heart.

Yesterday Donald ran errands: grocery shopping, visiting his

mother in the human warehouse as he called it, even though it was a decent place for what it

was. What a bother. She hardly knew who he was; still he didn't want her to die. Not yet. His old man had put her there. Forget that history, Donald told himself.

He took I-55 south toward the airport and his dismal apartment. One of these days he'd move. But he had plans to carry out before going anywhere.

What would he do without computers? He could discover anything. This afternoon he needed to put the final touches on his plans for the next project. He already knew what Bible verse to use.

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