

Deacon's Winter – first three Chapters

DEACON'S WINTER

CHAPTER ONE

I'd just ushered a dozen homeless people out of Saint Sebastian's Catholic Church. I hated doing it. Chicago in January is brutal for anyone on it's streets. The homeless came to the church for some warmth and to snooze in the pews. Our pastor, Father Posjena wouldn't allow the church to be open all night. So, I had to send them away in the late evening. "The church isn't a hostel for these people," as Father Posjena put it.

He didn't like it, but I told him I thought the church was for everyone—even in the middle of the night.

"You're not even a priest yet, Deacon," he said. Pity doesn't make us holy." It was only one of our ongoing disagreements. What a putz, as my friend Rabbi Mel Cohen would say. I was fed up with our pastor and I'm sure the feeling was mutual.

Still, Saint Sebastian's had been hit by its share of theft and vandalism, so the pastor had a point. When the wind chill plummeted to zero, the men's club and the Knights of Columbus, at my prodding, managed to persuade Pastor Posjena to keep the place open all night--with supervision. I took turns keeping watch with the more dedicated parishioners on Chicago's coldest nights. I told them their sacrifice was a way of getting closer to Christ. I wasn't sure if it was them I was trying to convince or myself.

After locking up I headed down the center aisle to my rooms just behind the church when I spotted a small green light above a confessional chamber. One of the street people was in there hiding from me, I told myself. But when I opened the door ready to say, "I'm sorry, but you can't stay ..." I saw, instead, a badly beaten woman slumped in the priest's armchair.

It wasn't my first rodeo. I'd been an MP in Iraq, and I knew that when drunk, soldiers—the mean ones—beat on anyone they could. But this woman was the most terrified I'd seen.

She jerked back and whimpered, crossing her arms in front of her bloody face.

I knelt down on one knee. "It's okay, I'm Deacon Adelius. I can help you."

She didn't answer. All of her energy was being spent on shaking.

I took her arm slowly, raising her to a sanding position, and we limped down the center aisle. She was clutching a large handbag. Her face was swollen, the way a face gets when it's hit more than once. Her clothes were unsuited for the weather. Short leather skirt and jacket, high heels. Her blouse was torn to the

waist, and bloody. Parts of her face were bleeding, but you don't die from that. The old statues on the walls of the church seemed to look down on us with pity.

Finally she made a sound. A sob.

When she collapsed at last, unable to walk even with my help, I carried her out the side door and locked it. We went into my sitting room and I set her down gently on my couch.

"You're safe now."

She sighed like a body giving up the ghost, dropped her head back ready to go to sleep. I couldn't let her. I had no idea what damage they'd done to her brain.

"You need to sit up, Ma'am."

She fought it, but I got her upright. I could see her eyes wandering as they surveyed my humble digs. I got a blanket and put it around her. She let me. I left her for a moment, wet a towel and wrapped it around some ice cubes.

Before I could ask permission to place the cold towel on her face, she spoke abruptly. "They were going to kill me!" Her voice was ragged as her blouse.

I asked the obvious, "Who?" I kept it gentle as I place the ice pack on her swollen left cheek. She didn't need an interrogation.

She shook her head but didn't answer. Instead, her eyes glazed over and she began to breathe more steadily. Shock was loosening its grip.

"Why were they after you?"

"My 'tell'." She drifted off.

"Tell?" My guess was that she had information someone wanted very badly.

Her arm hung off the couch near the purse she'd dropped. I opened it to find a wad of cash, a .22 Beretta—loaded—and a small Bible, but no ID. I dug deeper and pulled out a handful of business cards. Circular, purple, edged in gold. "Amber" was embossed in gold on one side, a phone number on the other. Creative. Expensive.

I tucked a few in my pocket—I don't know why—and opened the Bible. It was the New Testament only with mother-of-pearl cover. Still no ID. The first pages had been torn out. But a makeshift pocket had been glued on the inside front cover. Wedged in the pocket was a long flat key—the kind that opens metal boxes. Two arrows had been painted in red—probably nail polish—on one side. Letters and numbers were painted on the other. *Interesting.*

I returned the key to its pocket and put the Bible on my battered coffee table.

Amber was still out of it—unresponsive as a rag doll. I stripped off the remnants of her blouse and pulled one of my sweatshirts over her head. I was clinical—businesslike—until I saw the three cigarette burn marks on her breasts. "Jesus, have pity." What kind of low life bastard could do that?

Expensive flashy clothes, cash and the Beretta. It wasn't a stretch to figure she was probably a prostitute. No judgment. Just a woman in trouble. "What's your full name, Amber, and how did you get into this fix?"

At the sound of my voice, she twitched into consciousness.

“What the hell ... where ...?” Her eyes bored into mine. “Oh, yeah, the church. Thank God.”

I sat back. “I’ll thank God with you. How’re you feeling?”

“Are you kidding?” She slumped back and closed her eyes. “Like a friggin’ train wreck.”

“Let’s get you to an emergency room and call the police. You’re pretty banged up ... ”

She stiffened and raised her palm. “No. ... No doctors. No cops. Need to get away. Give me a mirror ... please.”

Bad idea. “Here, keep holding this towel against your face. It’ll keep the swelling down.”

She closed her eyes. “Got any aspirin?”

“Sure do. And something to warm you up.”

I made a mug of hot tea laced with lemon, honey and a splash of Southern Comfort. Amber smiled weakly as a thank you and gulped the hot drink with four aspirin. “I was so cold. God, that’s good. Thanks.” She took a few more long sips, then tugged the blanket to her chin and curled into a fetal position. “I’ll just close my eyes for a second. Then I gotta get away.”

Her voice faded as if she were talking to herself, but I caught some words: “I can bring ’em down. Bastards... Tamara ... murderers ... Andy. Got to get ... ” Her breathing slowed, and she was out again,

Her words replayed in my head. What the hell had she gotten into? What had I gotten into? Maybe I did attract trouble. Father Posjena accused me of it often enough. Never mind her profession—she needed help. To me, the choice was simple. I’d help.

Not like the choices facing me about the rest of my life. I lay back in my Lazy Boy, opening my eyes now and then to check on Amber. She slept on, murmuring intermittently. As I dozed and looked at the woman, my mind drifted to the decisions that faced me. Rejoin the seminary and make a life long commitment to the priesthood? Turn to a totally secular life? Or maybe remain a deacon and work for the church in ... special ways.

I couldn’t deny the tug of the religious life. I loved ...the peace, the rituals the power of the faith. I’d been conflicted about those choices even as a youngster. My ideas about justice still sometimes clashed with the church ... and the law. I’d ended up joining the Army as an eighteen year old. I had a good reason: Join up, and avoid prison. Several other juvenile delinquents had been given that option. Irony of ironies, I ended up an MP. Honorable discharge nine years ago.

I was drawn to the seminary—three years of it. Then I left. I had my reasons. Might have separated from the church altogether, but I’d promised Archbishop Laine I’d work here at the parish five more months. I am a man of my word. Other reasons compelled me to stay in this limbo ...

I drifted in and out of a restless sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

Nothing like a door crashing in to wake you up. Two men rushed in. Two others—one with a cane—stayed at the door. Amber screamed as one of the men went for her. The other guy raised a sap and swung at me, but I side-stepped the blow, grabbed his arm and jabbed a solid left hook to his ribs. When the first man dropped Amber and came for me, I backed up and reached for the weapon I'd dubbed Bat. I'd used a steel baton in Iraq, but my youth baseball bat works just fine in Chicago. And it's legal,

I sized up the big guy coming at me, his fists cocked. I lunged Bat forward breaking his nose. He stumbled backwards and sat hard, blood gushing. Bat—twenty-five inches long, eight ounces of aluminum—had done its job. The first man charged me with a stiletto. I parried, spun, threw my elbow into the man's left ear and backhanded Bat into the side of his right knee.

"Jesus Christ!" He flopped to the floor, clutching his knee and rocking back and forth.

"Don't take the Lord's name in vain." I said as I kicked him in the chest.

The guy with a bloody nose pulled a gun, and I hurled Bat sideways like a helicopter blade. It hit just as Amber shot him with her Beretta, the blast deafening in the small room. He spun around in a macabre dance and went down for good.

The man with the cane in the doorway shot Amber and turned the gun on me. I dived downwards, but not in time. Pain seared my left shoulder. Then a blow to the back of my head brought blackness. When I came to, Amber . . . the men . . . everybody was gone. Only blood remained. *Shit... laid low by a guy with a cane.*

I punched 911 into my cell phone and passed out again.

CHAPTER THREE

I woke up in a hospital, mouth parched, vision blurry. My head and shoulder were bulky with bandages, and I smelled like something that belonged in a medicine cabinet. I opened my eyes wide, trying to focus. The room was bright from the sun streaming through the window. A person came into view.

“Good morning, Mr. Adelius,” said the very white uniform. “I’m Wanda, how are you feeling?”

I blinked until I could read *Dixon* on the nametag. Her sweater was a blinding pink and she had strange blue-gray dyed hair, but I liked her smile. “Actually, I don’t feel too bad.” I croaked.

“It’s the medication. Some nasty sensations may return.”

Thanks a bunch, I thought. Didn’t need to hear that.

Nurse Wanda smiled again, professionally. “Press the buzzer if you’re in any discomfort and we’ll give you something. We want to manage your pain.”

“Where am I?”

“Saint Mary’s Hospital. According to your chart, paramedics brought you in at 3:30 a.m. I wasn’t on duty yet.”

“Water, please.” My mouth was the Sahara.

“Certainly.” She pressed a button somewhere and raised the bed to a 45-degree angle. She reached for a Styrofoam cup and slipped a straw between my lips. Her fingernail polish matched the color of her sweater.

I sipped. It helped. “So, how bad am I?”

“The doctor will have details. In short, you sustained a gunshot wound to the shoulder. Superficial graze, no bones broken.

Sustained a gunshot wound? Who talks like that?

“The blow to your head is of more concern,” she continued.

Oh, yeah. Hit from behind. I remember.

“You’ve had a brief neurological workup and so far everything looks fine.”

Visitors were next on the agenda. Two men. First in was good old Father Casmir Posjena, known to one and all as “Father Casey.”

For once, I had to look up at him. He probably liked that. I towered over him at six-foot-four. Even my thick mop of hair was probably an irritant, since he had a wispy gray comb-over. We tolerated one another. Civility was required, so he wished me a good morning. “You feeling better?”

“Yeah, I guess. What’s the time?”

“Just after eight-thirty.”

Behind the good father was a bull of a man in a topcoat. He had a broad pock-marked face, close-set eyes and a scar across his mouth. “Detective Rick Ditmar,” he said, tapping his badge. He didn’t look happy. “Excuse me, Father. I need a few words with Deacon Adelius ... privately.”

“Certainly,” said Father Casey, “but I need to stay.”

I wasn't surprised.

Ditmar nodded and turned back to me. “It may be a long shot, but we were hoping you can help us out. We fished a dead woman out of the river this morning. No ID.”

A knot tightened in my gut.

“God have mercy on her soul,” Father Casey said, “but what does this ... this violence have to do with Deacon?”

“He may have been the last person to see her alive, Father. She was wearing a Saint Sebastian's sweatshirt about five sizes too big. She'd been shot dead. Beaten and tortured, prior.” The detective lifted an eyebrow and waited for my response.

“The shirt's mine,” I said quickly, “and the woman's name was Amber.” Just saying her name brought her face to my mind. I'd probably be haunted by it for some time. I promised to keep her safe. Now she was dead. *Those bastards*. My skull throbbed, and I pressed the buzzer. Would a painkiller deaden my guilt? I doubted it.

I described the sequence of events and told the cop everything I'd seen, heard or guessed about the woman called Amber who carried a gun and purse full of money.

Ditmar took furious notes as I repeated her words: “Bring 'em down ... Tamara ... murderers ... Andy ... “

“Bring who down?” he asked,

“Don't know. She was out of it.”

“Would you recognize the man who shot you and her?”

Probably not. “Tall, dark hair, slicked back, had a cane. That's it.”

When I'd finished my story, he narrowed his eyes. “So, you had this prostitute named Amber in your apartment late last night.”

“I told you, I found her in the church confessional, beaten and bloody. Check out the confessional in the church.”

“And you didn't call the police.”

“No, she didn't want me to.”

“So you went along with it.”

He kept up the barrage of questions, and I cooperated. The guy had a job to do. I told him she was the reason for the break-in, that she probably had information they wanted.

Then he got personal. “She was wearing your sweatshirt—”

“Yeah, she was shivering with cold. I helped her out of her bloody rags and into my sweatshirt.”

“Uh, huh. The shirt off your back, so to speak? And how well did you know this woman?”

My face went hot. “Aren't you listening? I didn't know her at all.”

He kept hammering. “Any money exchanged between you and this Amber?”

“What? Hell no.” My fists clenched on their own.

“Doesn’t look good.” Ditmar switched his attention to Father Casey. “You’re his boss, right?”

“That’s one way to put it.” Father Casey’s face turned dark red. “He works for the parish.”

The detective angled a thumb in my direction. “He ever have woman problems before?”

“Certainly not.”

“You priests do stick together.” He scribbled something in his notebook.

“He’s not a priest. He’s a deacon. Deacon is also his first name.”

“How ‘bout that? We’ve got a Sergeant Sargeant at the station. Funny thing about names and jobs sometimes. ... well, that’s all for now. I’ll be around.”

“You’ve got this all wrong,” I said.

“Yeah, right. Think of anything else, call me.” He threw me some parting shots. “No last name for the woman, huh?”

“No.”

“She leave anything behind?”

“Just the blouse.”

“The one you helped her out of, right?”

didn’t dignify that one with an answer,

Ditmar’s face went broad and blank. “One of the forensic boys will come around and pick it up later.”

After he left, Father Casey raised his arms toward heaven. “Well, you’ve done it again!”

“Done what again?”

”He clasped his hands together as though ready to pray for me. “Got yourself mixed up with street people—criminals. A murdered prostitute no less. And your mother wanted you to be a priest. Even Archbishop Laine thought you were God’s Golden Boy. Now we’re dealing with police inquiries and dead prostitutes. Jesus, Mary and Joseph.”

I tried once more. “She was hurt and came to the church for sanctuary. Was I supposed to throw an injured woman out in the snow?”

“Dial 911 next time. That’s simple isn’t it? What a parish!” Father Casey marched out the door.

The pastor was all about control—of others, not himself--and living the good life. Father Casey performed all the weddings, then ate and drank himself through all the grand Chicago receptions that followed. The food would’ve fed the parish poor for days.

He’d carry on about the important people he’d dined with, all the old money people and politicians. The pastor was a good sermonizer, had a gift for fund-raising and was politically astute. Most of the parishioners viewed him as a favorite uncle. He was bucking for monsignor. *God forbid.*

Me? I was the parish workhorse. Maintenance, funerals, baptisms, youth programs and visiting the sick, you name it. Local citizens saw me as intimidating. I was big. I’d seen action in Iraq, and I was seen as someone connected to the church. All of which made for high currency in the neighborhood.

I'd made a commitment to some important people. Even though I'd left the seminary, I'd finish this practical part of my training. Truth to tell, I had nowhere to go. Sometimes not deciding is a decision in itself. I still felt a strong connection to my Lord.

The pastor had told me I was too independent and too much of a smartass to make a good priest anyhow. *Yeah, that's me.* I looked skyward for guidance ... or maybe deliverance. With church servants like Father Casey, how can we be strong? Instead of sustaining me, my faith distanced me from the body of believers. *God, show me the way.*

My thoughts crashed to earth, smoldering at the cop's insinuations, regretting that I couldn't protect a woman who came to us for help. She wound up saving me. I had this uncomfortable habit of righting wrongs and feeling responsible. The pain in my shoulder and head reminded me I had a score to settle. This was not over.

Pain was returning. Where the hell was nurse Wanda?