

OFFICE OF THE DEAD: A MONASTIC MYSTERY

by

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PART I: ROOM ENOUGH FOR ALL

Chapter 1

Chill bit into the night air. Ice blue illuminated the room and washed over him like water color, making the midnight shadow on his jaw seem blacker and his eyes more hollow. He read from the computer screen out loud as he stood before it: "But if anyone leads astray one of these little ones who believes in me, he would be better off thrown in the depths of the sea with a millstone hung around his neck!@

"What in the name of God does that mean?" mumbled Detective David Gold.

"It's a quotation from the Christian Gospel," whispered a small pleasant voice from behind him. Dr. Chantal Fleur was called in on this case because she was a friend of the family and she was well aware that the detective didn't seem too comfortable with either of those facts. Her healthy looking chin-length brown hair bounced as she stepped back from Gold when he responded.

"I go to temple from time to time but must have missed that one," he stated, as his two hundred plus pounds turned toward the forensic psychologist behind him. Gold revered Christ as a great prophet. "I suppose Jesus is the one who said what's on the screen. You would know more about that than me, having gone through Catholic school."

"That's what one would think," she said, "but these days I'm pretty much of an agnostic. You know, not believing in or denying the existence of God. How about we turn on the lights and take a look around, Detective?"

"Sounds okay to me," he said half-heartedly. "Just don't touch anything or interfere with what we are doing in any way. My men are out at the pool guarding the crime scene and just waiting for the coroner to arrive and when he does, they will be all over the place in here."

Wailing and sobbing penetrated the office from outside and made them both reflexively look out the window toward the pool. Chantal left abruptly and rushed toward a lanky looking man slumped in a beach chair sobbing. In his mid-fifties, silver hair, completely distraught, he was the husband of the victim. An officer stood by him, inwardly hoping that his presence would be of some comfort, although the officer had nothing to say.

"John, let's go in the house and talk."

The man eventually rose from the beach chair as if in a trance and followed Chantal through the office, past the computer with the cryptic message, and into the early American living room. Behind them the garish red and blue lights of police cars and the rescue squad whirled, flooding the atmosphere with a harsh carnival mood. The coroner was there now, removing a woman's body from the pool. Even though it was only shortly after midnight, he looked unshaven and half asleep.

"When did you last see Beth, John?" asked Chantal in a voice as soothing and gentle as stringed music.

"About eight o'clock," he replied numbly. "I went over to my office to see patients this evening as usual and did a little paper work afterwards, returning here close to eleven. She was nowhere to be found. I couldn't even find a note from her and all I saw was that sentence on the computer screen."

Is that some indirect type of suicide note?"

"I can't say yet, John, but we'll put it all together, I promise you. Right now we need to keep the focus on you."

"Dr. Fleur, can you come in here for a moment please?" Detective Gold boomed from the next room.

"Concentrate on some deep and easy breathing, John. Say the word 'one' or 'Jesus' each time you exhale. I'll be back as soon as I can."

She went into Beth's office. Gold's angry face met hers. His eyes bored holes through her skull.

"Please don't interrogate Dr. Johnson-Angelo. We want to keep him fresh for our people."

"I am just here as a friend, Detective; I'm not doing any interrogating. He is obviously in psychological shock and I am trying to minimize his symptoms."

"Sure you're not interrogating anyone, Doctor."

"Listen, I know that you don't like me, or perhaps it's just that you don't like my presence here. In either case, permit me to tell you that Beth and I went to grade school and high school together; we've been friends all our lives. We were split up for only a few years when she entered the Visitation Monastery in Wilmington, Delaware. The Order she entered was a cloistered one and we didn't see each other during my college years, but later, with the changes in the Church which came about through Vatican Council II, rules were relaxed and we got to see each other more frequently. She left religious

life in the early seventies during a lot of the turbulence following the Council. She was progressive and her Order was not progressive enough for her. Beth worked hard and continued her education, getting an STD--that's a Doctorate in Sacred Theology."

The detective didn't seem impressed and responded smugly. "The way I hear it, this lady was not only too progressive for the Order she was in, but for the rest of the Church as well."

"Yes," Chantal countered with a tone of pride in her voice. "She had articles published in scholarly journals on everything from the Church's response to the poor, to the role of women in society and the Church. She was a scholar; she was a thinker. Beth was a prayerful woman. She made people uncomfortable sometimes, but that's because I think she was prophetic."

"Prophetic?" interrupted the detective. "Isn't that a Jewish concept?"

"The tradition continued into Christianity. Many people think that prophets are similar to fortune tellers, but actually they are women and men who believe that they have a message from the Lord for the rest of society. Most of the time we don't want to hear the message. They got their fortune teller reputation because in the Jewish Bible, at least, they would often say that if such-and-such a behavior or attitude wasn't changed, something negative would occur, and it often did."

"Doctor, why would this lady want to kill herself?"

"I don't think Beth did, Detective."

"Well," the investigator mumbled in a dubious tone, "when the coroner is through we'll know whether it's suicide or murder. Please stay away from everyone involved—okay?"

"I'll not disrupt your investigation, Detective, but my friend needs me at this time."

A blue uniformed police officer trying to mask his anxiety by an abrupt air and confident gait came into the room. He couldn't have been more than twenty-two years of age. "The coroner just left with the body, sir, and the team wants to come into the house now and gather evidence in here."

"Fine, officer, send them in." Eyeing Chantal, Gold continued: "On second thought, Doctor," he said, "maybe you can be of some help. Why not take the husband out for a little walk or something until we're through."

"Suits me fine, Detective."

Chapter 2

"Dr. Fleur's office, how can I help you?" said a crisp and efficient masculine voice on the other end of the telephone line.

"This is Detective Gold. I'd like to speak with the doctor or leave a message with her secretary."

"I'm her administrative assistant. I'll see that she gets any message you leave."

What is this world coming to, thought Gold. A man's voice as administrative assistant--what next? "Okay buddy, would you have her call me, it's police business and very important?"

"Certainly, Detective Gold, she should be finishing her current session with a patient any time now. He paused a moment before continuing. If you hold on a minute, her office door is opening

and I think she'll be able to take your call shortly."

"Good, thanks a lot. Keep up the good work." And get a real job, he thought.

The forensic psychologist dictated some notes into a small tape recorder for a few minutes before picking up the telephone. "Good morning, Detective. Sorry to keep you waiting. If I don't dictate my progress notes immediately after a session I either forget to or they are not as complete or helpful when I refer to them later. But enough of that. I hope you slept well after our grisly adventure last night."

"I sure did, Doctor. It wasn't any fun being at the crime scene with a dead body either," he responded with an ever so slight chuckle.

Is that an attempt at rapport via humor or simply an insult about being with me last night, she thought to herself. Chantal let the comment pass--for the moment anyway. Maybe her progress notes were not always the greatest, but her memory was!

"Dr. Fleur, I need your help. You seem somewhat knowledgeable about spiritual matters and Church related issues."

"Well, Detective, I minored in philosophy and went through Catholic school, and have--had--a friend whom I just lost who is--was--a former nun." Don't cry now Chantal, or this neanderthal will really think that you are a wimp.

"Sorry I didn't pick up on your pain last night, Doctor. I was given a gold shield when I became a police detective and an emotional shield when I became a cop. It was a loss for you, wasn't

it?"

"Yes. Yes it was, Detective, but I try to be professional in situations like that. I'll deal with my mourning in my own way and on my own time." He received his emotional shield when he became a human being, Chantal mused.

"Our forensics people are trying to make sense out of the biblical quotation about leading little ones astray and having a rock tied around your neck and being thrown in the water if you do, and how this may relate to the suicide, murder, whatever it turns out to be."

"Detective, Beth was a theologian. She spent her life trying to draw closer to the sacred and to make sense out of it for the rest of us. Maybe she was struggling with that passage for some personal or academic reason. Does the coroner have any sense of whether her death was suicide--she paused before adding--or murder?" Both of those words choked Beth as she said them. Breathing became difficult as she thought of Beth underwater.

"It looks like murder at this point, Doctor. You see there was a rock carefully tied to a rope and then just as carefully tied to your friend's neck when we found her."

"Oh, @ in a choked voice, Chantal gasped, "My God, what a horrible death!"

Gold, belatedly remembering that the deceased was Fleur's friend, quickly suggested, "We can talk later if you like, Doctor. I know that you are busy."

"Oh no, that's all right. I'm just a little shaken. I'd really like to find out what happened and help in any way I can."

"Doctor, is there a priest you know or someone at the office building at the Diocese that we can bounce some of this off of to try to make sense out of it? He would need to be someone willing to spend some time with us processing all of this, someone with a flair for investigative work. Perhaps someone like yourself."

"I know people at the Chancery offices because I do some consulting for the Marriage Tribunal-- you know--dealing with the petitions for marriage annulment of people married in the Catholic Church who've been divorced so that they can marry again in the Church. I've also done some psychological assessments on candidates going into religious life as Sisters or Religious Brothers, or becoming monks or nuns, for people--only men at this point--going into the Diocesan priesthood and diaconate, and for an ever growing number of lay people in ministry, so I have my connections, Detective, but I think there's another person that would better serve our needs."

"Here comes a thought--I bet he's a woman."

"Wrong, Kreskin. I went to graduate school and interned with him. He's a Catholic monk and clinical psychologist who specializes in behavioral medicine. He is, what shall I say, gentle but firm.

That is, he has a gentle strength."

"Pardon my Judaism, but I thought monks baked bread or made wine or something, and never talked."

"You are not alone, Detective, many Catholics stereotype us that way also. Some monastics continue to support themselves by baking bread or making wine, but there are many small monasteries

and religious communities of men and women springing anew up since the Second Vatican Council when all the changes occurred in the Church. They are refashioning religious life and, in some ways, going back to its early roots and doing contemporary work to support themselves. They spend a good deal of time in silence, not as penance, but in order to have a quiet spirit which can hear the Lord and others better. My friend says it's like getting the static out of a radio so the message comes through more clearly. They don't have a TV; I guess that's why he used the image of a radio."

"My Aunt Elsie would have used the image of a Victrola. At any rate, you trust the guy and he's got good credentials, right?"

"The best, Officer."

"The best, Detective," he corrected.

"Detective, please understand that I don't want to >bother your people,= to put it in your words."

"All right, all right, I deserve that. You're beginning to sound like my ex-wife."

"Tell you what, Detective, I have a few more patients to see and then a break from late afternoon till early evening. You could, if you like, pick me up around three. I can go over to the monastery where my friend is with you for a few hours. I'll put my mounds of insurance forms, managed care--or as many of us call it "managed uncare"--applications and treatment reports aside in honor of Beth."

"That sounds good, Doctor. You're a great guy--I mean person--I mean professional.

"Humph."

BZZZZ.

Chapter 3

She slipped into his car looking surprising fresh after her busy morning and early afternoon. She smelled of "Loves Fresh Lemon" perfume--and he smelled of perspiration. "I'll be Chantal if you'll be Dave," she said, wondering what sort of response she would receive.

"That's okay by me as long as you don't mess with my people," he said, and they both smiled.

"Take route 209 South out of town. We'll be there in less than twenty minutes. We're headed out to the western part of Monroe County, the edge of the Pocono Mountains toward Brodheadsville."

"I don't remember any monastery out there," he said with a quizzical look. "What are you getting me into?"

"Remember that I said that this is new and small. The place was founded in 1987 by my friend."

"Hey, are you really sure he's legit? Give me his social security number and I'll put it through the police computer."

"Trust me on this one, Dave. In fact, the monastery was just listed in the *Scranton Diocesan*

Directory and in the *Official Catholic Directory* for the first time last year. That's a real milestone for a young monastery. Francis was a member of a large international pontifical religious order for about twenty-seven years but always felt called to a more contemplative form of that life."

"I'm not sure what all this means but keep going, Chantal. I need all the enlightenment I can get."

"His original Order was made up of men with monastic habits on that spent most of their time running schools, parishes, and foreign missions and were about as talkative and active as most people except that they lived in communities and were celibate. Francis--that's his name--wanted more emphasis on silence and common prayer. I think they call the common prayer the Liturgy of the Hours these days; they used to call it the Divine Office. 'Office' implied a burden or duty; 'liturgy' has to do with the prayer of the People of God throughout the world, being united in praise and worship freely given. Francis is a positive person who reverences the power in words and symbols. He was also interested in a wholistic approach to the spiritual life, so his community has both men and women in it as well as a number of lay women and men associated with the monastery who live in their own homes but gather there for meetings, prayer, and the like."

"This sounds fishy, Chantal. Again, what are you getting me into?"

"No, Dave, honestly, you'll be pleasantly surprised. If you like, you can call the Bishop and check out his status. The Bishop approved the foundation of the monastery and it has been going very nicely. They work very hard to support themselves, keep a great deal of silence, and meditate quite a

bit. They don't even have a TV--there would be little time for it anyway. Just don't look for a huge building and big arches and a bell tower and all of that, okay? If you want arches you had better head for McDonald's.

He's just about making it financially. They live on a shoe string. They seem happy and authentic. They have a few acres and a house with a few out buildings. I think the chapel's in a barn; they call the chapel an "oratory" which is based on the Latin word *ora* or prayer and there's a guest house for men where a couple of monks live. The women in the community, that is the nuns, and the women guests on retreat stay in the main building. At least that's what it was like when I was out there about a year ago. Once in a while Francis and I collaborate on cases. As I said, he's a clinical psychologist and I'm a forensic psychologist and sometimes our backgrounds blend very nicely together. His specialty, actually it's a sub-specialty, is behavioral medicine. He treats a lot of people who have physical illness such as chronic pain, cancer, HIV/AIDS through the use of behavioral science techniques. He uses clinical hypnosis and a technique called "Therapeutic Touch" quite often."

"This guy is sounding flakier and flakier to me Chantal. I am a city cop. I carry a gun and see the worst side of life everyday. I don't know anything about things like this."

That's why I stayed with the Western things he does. Francis utilizes many Eastern healing techniques as well. He is especially fond of something called medical qigong, which is apparently spelled a number of different ways and includes slow physical movements, breathing exercises, as well as meditation. If I have things straight, medical qigong is not only a very ancient Eastern form of

Therapeutic Touch but also an entire system of Chinese medicine. @

A Are there any scientific studies to back this stuff up, Chantal? @

A Oh yes, just a search on the Internet can yield hundreds of studies with positive results, but many people, even well trained scientists, have their mind made up and are not open to looking at the data. Researchers and Western doctors are beginning to say, however, that Chinese medicinal herbs are very powerful and must be used with caution, the way Francis does. @

A Like I say, I know very little about such things. @

"Well, Dave, there's one way to find out. You'll just have to meet the man."

Turning left off the highway and down a winding country road lined with leafy green trees on either side took us into a quieter and more serene inner and outer space. I was feeling lots of pain inside but trying not to show it to Dave or to anyone else. I really hadn't had time to let it all sink in. Beth was dead, probably murdered. As I quieted down, Dave, in contrast, seemed to get more and more restless. A simple red wooden sign with white lettering under the mailbox, probably handmade by one of the monastics, marked the driveway. "Salesian Monastery," it said. As we drove up the bumpy driveway, a large cross made out of old telephone poles, and impressive in its stark simplicity, welcomed us. We parked under it and walked toward the main building--a white, fairly large raised a ranch house with a little barn red porch on the front.

"Brother Benedict. Brother Benedict." Chantal began to yell excitedly over toward a garden where a man in his late sixties with gray thinning hair and overalls was weeding the vegetables. He

looked up, a little startled, or maybe a little annoyed, and finally a look of resignation came over his face.

He got up quietly and walked toward the psychologist.

"Welcome, Dr. Fleur. I hope your presence here doesn't mean any trouble, or more work for our abbot. Please try to be as kind as you can to him.

"Okay Brother, it's a deal. Detective Gold, I'd like you to meet Brother Benedict, one of the members of the community."

"Pleased to meet you" went back and forth.

"A detective, huh," muttered the monk. I suppose this one will be more trouble than ever! Abbot Francis is expecting your folks. Let me show you over to his office in the Hermitage."

We walked past the main house and, hidden away alongside the building, were a white mobile home. We opened the rear door which had a vinyl magnetic "Welcome" sign on it and then went into a small waiting area where we sat down on an old orange couch. The inside door to our left was closed and on it was a computer generated sign covered in plastic saying "Brother Francis de Sales, SMC, EdD." A stack of old *Catholic Digest* and *New Covenant* magazines sat on an end table, along with a few books and tapes that the monastery was peddling from their home and by mail order.

On the other side of the door lay a man in his late thirties stretched out on a massage table. He was dressed in faded grey gym shorts and his face radiated serenity. Shoulder length brown hair made him look like a left over from the sixties. His eyes were closed, as if in prayer. On one side of the table, a Thomas Merton looking man in his late forties wearing a light gray tunic and navy blue scapular

with a hood lowered over his shoulders, the garb belted in the middle, was moving his hands slowly from head to foot a few inches above the physical body of the person on the table. The monk's intently listening face seemed to be registering feelings or perhaps some other type of information. On observation, it was difficult to discern if what the monk was receiving was coming from within him or through his patient. The abbot returned to the head and scanned down the body with his hands, lingering most especially around the heart. The patient turned on his side and the monk scanned the back from head to foot several times.

"Okay Mike, you can sit up whenever you like. Just take your time and make the transition gently and easily, opening your eyes gradually."

Mike just lay there for about two minutes, then opened his eyes and asked: "Dr. Francis, how did you know about the pain in my heart last time?"

"I can't completely explain it, Mike, but sometimes I get intuitive understandings when I do Therapeutic Touch. Some would call it a gift of the Holy Spirit, something unearned. At any rate, the information can be diagnostic of physical, psychological, or spiritual situations."

"That helps some. I felt electricity moving through me this time even more so than last and I saw some flashes of light," the patient said. "I had a pain in my heart that was very old and I knew I had no cardiac condition. But I now know what it is." He paused for a moment before continuing. "I've been estranged from my parents for some years. They were very neglectful and verbally abusive and I cut myself off from them. I need to do something with that but I'm not sure I know what just

yet."

"Keep thinking about it Mike and maybe we can come up with some strategies next time.

Then we'll get rid of that pain in your heart--okay?"

"Not only okay, Dr. Francis, it's awesome!"

"See you next week at the same time Mike. I'm going out in the waiting room now to greet some people who want to see me. You can leave by the office door whenever you are ready. Take your time. By the way, Mike, I'd kill for your hair!"

"Thank you, and I'd kill for your intuition."

The abbot walked through the door and into the waiting room, shut the door behind him, and startled Dave by giving Chantal a big hug along with a kiss on her cheek. "It's so good to see you again, Francis. Thanks for taking time out of your busy day."

"It's a wonderful excuse to be able to see you, Chantal. This must be Detective Gold."

"Yes, ah, Brother, Abbot, Doctor."

"Francis is fine. I like 'Brother' best, but most of the time I wind up getting called 'Abbot,' so whatever works. A few calls me 'Doctor.' The developmental researcher Erik Erikson says that we can experience an identity versus role confusion crisis as we move through life. I've been through it about six times now. How about if we walk around outside a little. It's a glorious day and I am sure that we all could use a little fresh air since our work coops us up a lot."

The other two nodded and followed Francis out the door. They walked past the main building.

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