PREY FOR ME

Guilt can be suffocating. For some of the parishioners of my small-town church, unburdening a heavy conscience becomes more critical to life than the next heartbeat. Since joining this congregation, I have learned to leave the confessional door open a notch so that I can see when a repentant soul has entered. It’s a small sacrifice to make for those who can’t wait until the normal hours of confession.

The sun was cresting the eastern horizon when I noticed someone had pulled the oak door shut. I took my seat in the box and slid the panel open. Through the small black grid separating us, I caught the outline of a dark-suited man.

“I’m not sure how this is done,” he said.

“You’ve never given confession before. Are you catholic?”

“I think so.” He sounded more relaxed than I would have expected from someone so anxious to begin their day with absolution. I explained the typical introduction, and he began again.

“And what would you like to confess?” I asked.

“I’ve taken a life.”

His matter-of-factness sent goose flesh prickling down my arms. It’s one thing to admit to committing the ultimate sin but quite another to utter those words without a hint of remorse.

“You are sworn to a vow of secrecy, right? You can’t repeat what I tell you to anyone?”

“My son, you misunderstand the purpose of this room and the words spoken between us in confidence. I’m not here to bear witness to a murder and tell you that all is forgiven. Perhaps someday, when you feel contrition, you could make your peace with God and then turn yourself in to the police.”

“I’m not sure they would understand.”

“What more is there to understand? You have committed the ultimate crime. Remorse is the first step toward forgiveness. Without that, no one can help you.”

“You’ve already passed judgment. That doesn’t sound like a compassionate man of the cloth. Honestly, Father, I’m being the calm voice of reason here when that’s your job.”

“How can you justify such a terrible act?”

“Because a just and compassionate God will forgive me. You’re his agent on earth, so I came to you. Look,” he said, “I’m not going to the police. That means you are the only hope of justice being served.”

My insides were on an elevator, dropping fifty floors. I worked to get my breathing under control as I found my voice. “You come here thinking you can shed your demons by dumping that responsibility on me? You don’t need a confessional. You need a good lawyer and an exorcism.”

“We’ve barely met, and you already believe I’m possessed by the devil?”

“Who else talks about committing murder so coldly?” I nearly screamed.

“You really should do something about that temper.”

“Look who’s talking!”

“Perhaps I would be better served by finding a priest with more experience. I just wonder what the next priest might say when I explain you turned me away.”

He was right. I was failing at my core duty. “The circumstances of your confession are far beyond what I deal with here.”

“I understand.”

“If I can no longer hear of your acts without being compelled to bring in law enforcement, we stop, and you walk away. Will you agree to these terms?”

His silence was my confirmation.

“A young girl used to attend this parish. Nineteen, pretty, worked as a waitress at the Cozy Diner and went to school nights at the community college.”

My stomach twisted, anticipating where this was going. I silently pleaded he wouldn’t tell me he had done something terrible to that sweet girl.

“Hard worker,” he continued. “Everyone loved her. Mary worked the breakfast shift. She studied for class on her lunch break. Took the dinner shift most days. Worked until she had to leave for school. That was her whole day. Work and school.”

He was speaking of Mary Welling. Her name and face were posted everywhere in town. On building walls, message boards, and street posts. *Missing.* I felt sick. Lightheaded. I rolled a rosary between my fingers, praying I wasn’t about to hear those words.

“Are you still listening?”

I wanted to punch out the small grid window that separated us, grab this man by the throat, and choke him for what he was about to reveal. Deal or no deal, I couldn’t do this. No matter how I prodded myself, I didn’t have the strength to hear someone confess to killing an innocent young girl. Was there nothing in the years of studying to become a priest that had prepared me for such a moment? I realized I had to take it on faith that God was judging me as I sat in judgment of this man. I took a breath. “Continue.”

“Watching her became a bright part of my day. Her bright green eyes, blonde hair, spotless red uniform, her scent as she walked past. She wore a heart-shaped locket on a thin gold chain. It reminded me of the one my daughter wore. She would have been about the same age. Perhaps that’s why I took such an interest in Mary. I knew her routine and the people she trusted. *He* wasn’t one of them.”

“He?” Did someone step into her life and rouse a fit of jealousy that drove this man to murder?

“Kind of a creep,” he continued. “Scruffy. Unkempt. No spark of life behind those eyes. His clothes always looked slept-in. Lived in the hills a few miles outside of town. Didn’t come down very often. He didn’t belong here. Stuck out like a shark in a koi pond. I listened to him try to strike up a conversation a few times as she waited his table. She was cordial. He was awkward. He read more into her kindness than she intended.”

Curiosity now took over. I had to know more.

“He started following her from a distance. She never knew he was there. I did. Because I was following *him*.”

My mind painted a dreadful image of two bodies lying side-by-side in a shallow grave with this man standing over them, a shovel in one hand, a long, shiny knife dripping blood and reflecting the moonlight in the other. I pushed it away, still clinging to the hope of a happier ending. But there was nothing happy about what was coming.

“Last week, I got to the diner close to noon. The other waitress said Mary hadn’t shown up for her morning shift. I drove all over town, checking every place she might go. My bad feeling kept building. I knew what he’d done before I found him.”

“You… you found him?” I said. “Where? What happened to Mary?”

“I knocked on the door of his shack and saw the recognition in his eyes. As he opened his mouth to speak, I filled it with knuckles and laid him out flat. He came to, gagged, and taped to a chair. I wanted him to know the same fear he made her feel.”

“You can’t assume a crime has been committed without proof. Please don’t tell me you did anything without knowing for certain.”

“Rest assured, Father, I wouldn’t do that.”

“So, this man is safe?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Bile burned up the back of my throat. “Tell me.”

“I searched his place before he came to. I didn’t want to find anything. I would have rather cut him loose and paid for the teeth I knocked out. He didn’t give me that choice.”

“What…” the words were sticking in my throat. “What did you find?”

“A gold locket—her locket—was hanging on his bedroom dresser mirror. The top of the dresser was covered with trinkets: rings, bracelets, necklaces, locks of hair, keepsakes from other conquests. I had discovered his altar of macabre souvenirs.”

“Oh, dear God,” I said with a whimper.

“One of the banded braids of hair—it was—the same color as my little girl’s.”

I found myself rocking back and forth, fearful of what would come next. “Did—did he tell you what he did to them?”

“Not at first. It took some persuasion. More than I expected. He was very pain-tolerant. Tell me, how is your memory, Father?”

“Good.”

“There’s a dirt road that cuts off the main highway and goes up into the hills. Biscayne Road. Follow that for six miles. It goes past a small bluff and then through a meadow. Twenty feet from the tallest oak, you will come across some disturbed ground. Tell the police to dig there.”

“How many?” I asked, not sure I wanted the answer.

“Six. Maybe more.”

I heard the hinges squeak as the door closed. From outside the confessional, he said, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned, and I am without remorse. God has found a purpose for me, and I’m ready to be called upon again.”

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