

Chapter 1

Here We Go Again

It wasn't every day that a Chicago police lieutenant teamed up with a Catholic priest to solve a crime, but this wasn't every day, and Father James Ward wasn't just any priest. The same could be said about his unofficial partner, Detective Lieutenant Spencer Roscoe.

Roscoe, a twenty-two-year police veteran and family man at fifty-plus years old, was an established, well-respected member of the law enforcement community. Father Ward, in contrast, was a thirty-year-old man of the cloth, still somewhat wet behind the ears, only recently assigned to his first parish. On paper, their two dissimilar lines of work weren't a match made in heaven.

It seemed that, despite their differences, when two men with a common goal—the support of good vs. evil—were brought together by some greater power, they made the world a better place for everyone.

It was going to be another one of those days. A day when the two champions for good would once again go face to face with the evil doings of a society that has lost its way.

“Come on, we'll take my car, it'll be faster,” said Lieutenant Roscoe.

“Why can't we just each take our own car. I'll just meet you there?”

“It’s a crime scene, for gosh sake.”

Roscoe used the words “for gosh sake,” instead of saying, “for God’s sake,” in deference to Father Ward's vocation.

“Time is of the essence,” he said. “The body’s getting cold. I’ll run you back up here to retrieve your car later.”

Father Ward wasn’t happy with Roscoe’s plan, but in consideration of an active crime scene, he chose not to argue.

In a way, Roscoe was right. He could speed to the crime scene, in his unmarked police car with its siren and emergency flashing lights, faster than Father Ward could maneuver his old blue Buick through rush hour traffic.

The truth was, it wasn’t just the expediency of the moment that motivated Roscoe. He wanted to get the good father in his car so he could question him as to why he was meeting privately with Assistant District Attorney Janine O’Connell, in street clothes no less, not displaying priestly vestments of any kind. And he wanted to know what the meeting with one of the most beautiful women in Chicago meant to the priest’s vows of celibacy.

Sliding behind the wheel, Roscoe tossed one of those portable blue and white flashing emergency lights on his dashboard and piped, “Hang on”. Father Ward barely had time to buckle his seatbelt when Roscoe hit the gas and sped out of the parking lot, heading south to Chicago’s Goodtown neighborhood.

They had scarcely turned out onto the main street when Roscoe started his inquiry, "So, you gonna tell me what you and Janine O'Connell were talking about, or do I have to pry it out of you?"

A.D.A. O'Connell confided in him a secret that she shared with very few people. Her sexual orientation did not follow the traditional one-man with one-woman teachings of the church. So, like Father Ward, she chose celibacy, at least for now. Unlike Father Ward, she made her choice to avoid being ostracized by her colleagues in the District Attorney's office. Perhaps she thought he would treat it with the sanctity of the confessional.

"It's personal," replied Father Ward. "Janine and I have developed a friendship. We were just having a conversation. Not unlike the type of private conversation you and I might have."

"Sounds boring. All we ever talk about is bad guys, gangs, and victims. Then you try to convince me that God is behind everything people do."

"He is," argued Father Ward. "Besides, we had a nice conversation, you, me, and your wife Kathleen just the other day, and we didn't talk about God or bad guys. At least not much."

Speeding along with the siren blasting, Roscoe mumbled, "Okay, so don't tell me."

With Roscoe's inquisition temporarily stymied, Father Ward changed the subject. This was the second dead body found in the neighborhood surrounding St. Camille's Church

in just five weeks. When assigned by the bishop to reopen the church, which had been closed for five years, Father Ward never expected to become an amateur detective.

"I hope these incidents aren't a regular thing; we can't abide finding dead bodies every couple of weeks."

"Actually, there hasn't been a violent crime in Goodtown in a long time. I'm hoping it's not coincidental with St Camille's reopening. Five years is a long time for any neighborhood not to have a church. Besides, these aren't your people anyway."

"They're all my people. Even the ones who don't come to church on Sunday," replied Father Ward. "Besides, why would reopening the church cause people to start killing each other? We preach love, acceptance, compassion."

"Oh, it's not you per se. It's just the environment. Every so often, the gangs try to flex their muscles. They try and gain an advantage over the current situation. Maybe the church's reopening woke them up, so they're using the distraction to their advantage."

As Roscoe, like a racecar driver, piloted the plain sedan off the expressway ramp and raced south along Wallace Rd., Father Ward held on for dear life while he contemplated what Roscoe just said. With nothing more to discuss, they both kept silent the rest of the way.

By the time the two atypical partners arrived at the crime scene at the rear of a vacant lot just off Mariski Ave. between 7th and 8th Streets, the police had blocked off the street and the alley, and a team of crime scene investigators was unpacking their equipment from a blue and white Mobile Forensic Van.

Everyone at the scene knew Lieutenant Spencer Roscoe, and even though he didn't need to tell anyone, he flashed his badge, indicating he was now in charge. Waiving the patrol officers back, he guided Father Ward toward the back of the lot.

Milling around an abandoned, rusted old green station wagon, several of Chicago's finest pointed at the scene, posing theories about what happened and why. One patrolman commented to Roscoe, "Looks like she was living in the back of the car."

In the cargo area, in the back, were piles of clothing, shoes, a blanket, and some toiletries.

Donning blue latex gloves, Roscoe handed a pair to Father Ward. "Better put these on."

In the back seat of the car lay the body of a half-dressed black female. Her blouse was unbuttoned, exposing her breasts, and her skirt was pulled up around her waist. Her panties were partly torn off.

"You recognize her?" Lieutenant Spencer Roscoe asked.

"Yes, I've seen her before on the corner." Motioning toward 8th Street, Father Ward replied. "I've tried to engage her in conversation, but she always spurned me. She said my presence was bad for business."

Roscoe snorted, trying not to laugh. Laughing at a dead body, a crime victim, was inappropriate for a police lieutenant, even one as old and seasoned as Roscoe.

"Her real name was Keshera; on the street, she went by the name Shera. We've arrested her a dozen times on solicitation charges. Each time we pulled her off the

streets, one of Tyrone Johnson's lawyers would show up and convince the judge it was a misunderstanding," said Roscoe.

Father Ward knew Tyrone Johnson. He was the boss of the gang that controlled most of the illicit drug trade, racketeering, and prostitution on the east side of Goodtown. Known casually as ToJo, Johnson and Father Ward had butted heads more than once over ToJo's intimidation of the residents. He hoped Keshera's death wasn't going to result in another standoff between him and ToJo.

Lieutenant Roscoe, still grumbling in frustration over the actions of the Chicago Prostitution and Trafficking Intervention Court, moaned, "The judge didn't want to lock her up in an already overcrowded jail, so every time she got arrested, the court gave her a fine and time served. ToJo's lawyer paid her fine, and she's back out on the corner a few hours later."

"I don't know how anyone could believe what she did was a misunderstanding," said Father Ward. "She even tried soliciting me, and I was wearing a clergy shirt and collar."

Nodding in agreement, the Lieutenant lamented, "Looks like she was turning a trick, and things went awry."

Seeing Keshera's body lying there, empty and lifeless, churned his stomach. He had seen dead bodies before. Just a few weeks ago, he prayed over the bleeding corpse of a man named Edward Wasburn, only a few streets away. But he had never met Wasburn; he didn't know him as a person. Father Ward knew Keshera; he had spoken

with her and seen the desperation on her face. She was real, someone who needed help.

Now she was lying there, her body still warm. The victim of a life that had gone astray. He knew that every prostitute working in this neighborhood was on borrowed time. Every solicitation, every trick they turned, could be their last one. Many of the girls were drug addicts, alcoholics, or both. The alcohol and drugs helped blur the reality of their situation. Some of the girls were trafficked in from foreign countries, others came to sell themselves on these streets because they had nowhere else to go and no other way to survive.

It sounds callous for a priest to think poorly about anyone, but strangely, Father Ward was relieved to see it was Keshera. As prostitutes go, Keshera was one of the older girls. Having been in the business for years, she had lost much of her desirability. Overweight and poorly groomed, she was relegated to performing her sex acts in the back seat of a junk car.

Customers willing to pay more for a better experience in a private room with a younger, prettier girl, bypassed the corner and went to the rooming house down the street, where it was safer.

The relief Father Wards felt came not because he disliked Keshera, but because the dead woman wasn't the young Hispanic girl he had met a few weeks ago, the one he tried to save from the same fate. He saw the young girl at mass a few weeks ago and hadn't seen her in front of the rooming house lately. He was holding out hope that she had left her life of selling her body to strangers and returned home to her family.

Before Roscoe could start his examination of the crime scene, Father Ward pulled a rosary from a leather pouch, bent down on one knee, and prayed over the body.

As he knelt there asking God to accept the soul of this tortured victim lying in the back seat of a filthy hulk of rusty metal, his concentration was broken by Roscoe exclaiming, "We'll canvass the neighborhood, but I can almost guarantee no one saw anything."

Then he turned to Father Ward and asked, "What do you think? Do you think you can ask around, maybe find out anything about what happened here? You might have better success than the police."

Father Ward, nodding in disappointment, said, "I'll try. She usually hangs out on the corner with another woman about her age. I'll go talk to her. She might have some information."

The CSI photographer took more than a dozen pictures from as many angles as possible before he let Roscoe step in and make his close-up observations. When their turn came to look inside, Roscoe entered from the driver's side, and Father Ward stepped around to the passenger side.

Poking his head in, Father Ward's nostrils fill with the combined smells of body odor, cigarette smoke, damp upholstery, and a lavender air freshener lying on the dashboard. Trying not to breathe deeply, he glanced across at Roscoe, who didn't even flinch at the stink.

From their individual perspectives, they scrutinized the contents, searching for evidence. On the floor of the car lay several hypodermic needles. It was hard to tell

whether they were recently used or left over from previous encounters. Under the front seat lay the discarded wrapper from a condom. It looked fresh, but the condom wasn't visible.

As Roscoe made notes, Father Ward noticed what he thought might be a clue. "It looks like her neck is bruised, just below the jaw. It could have been part of a rough sexual game, but she may have been strangled on purpose."

"Good catch. What else do you notice?" asked Lieutenant Roscoe.

Father Ward looked over her body, "Her breasts have what looks like bite marks."

Someone, likely her last sexual partner, had bitten down hard on both of her breasts. Hard enough to draw blood and leave the occlusion pattern of their mouth.

Shaking his head, Roscoe grumbled, "What kind of sicko treats a woman like this? I swear I don't understand why someone would do that."

Whether the injuries occurred before her death or after was yet to be determined, but Roscoe surmised, "It had to be painful. I'll alert the Medical Examiner to measure and pattern them. If we find any suspects, we'll match their teeth with the bite marks. Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky."

Father Ward watched as Roscoe made notes on an electronic tablet. Even though he was a twenty-plus-year veteran, unlike many police officers his age who still took notes on a pad of paper, Roscoe had learned to use technology to help him keep up with the fast pace of modern police work.

As the two pseudo-partners examined the scene, the police Medical Examiner approached. Father Ward recognized her as Sonjia Blasic. She was the same doctor assigned to the Edward Washburn case that Roscoe and he had worked on a few weeks earlier.

She greeted Father Ward warmly, "Father, it's good to see you again."

Noticing Father Ward's casual street clothes, she added, "I see you're out of uniform today."

Father Ward thought, *She must be Catholic?* Her awareness of his position and ceremonial garb was something only a Catholic might understand. Non-Catholics tend to view priests with indifference.

"I had a private meeting downtown when the call came in," he replied.

They watched as Dr. Blasic gave the body a cursory examination. Using a specialized electronic thermometer and considering the ambient overnight temperature, she said, "Looks like the time of death was between midnight and 4:00 am. Possible strangulation, maybe an overdose. I won't know until I get her in the examination room."

Before they could discover additional evidence, Sonjia called out, "Take a look at this, Lieutenant. There are cut marks on the palm of her hand. It looks like someone carved a symbol of sorts into her skin. The cuts look fresh. This could mean something."

Lieutenant Roscoe examined the cut marks on Keshera's hand. They were deep and precise. Whoever did it was methodical and skilled with a blade. "I've never seen anything like this from the local gangs," he said.

Whoever had made the cuts was either a narcissist or wanted to make a statement about why Keshera was targeted. Calling out to the CSI photographer, he said, "Get some clean shots of these markings. They might be a clue to whoever did this."

Roscoe continued to make notes on the tablet of every fact or clue he could perceive. Including the weather, the condition of the car, and the buildings surrounding the scene.

Moving outside the vehicle, Roscoe looked for clues such as footprints, cigarette butts, or anything discarded that might provide fingerprints or DNA. He instructed the CSI team to bag several items that on the surface might look unimportant or prove meaningless; he believed better safe than sorry.

Both men agreed. It was clear the woman hadn't died of natural causes. Whether her death was an unfortunate accident or a premeditated crime was still to be determined.

After an hour documenting everything in and around the vacant lot, Roscoe shut down the crime scene. Father Ward looked at his watch. His morning, which started at the coffee shop downtown, was now getting late, and he hadn't done any church related work.

He grabbed his phone and called the church secretary, Martha Wozniki, at the rectory to check on things. According to Martha, all was quiet, which, for Father Ward, was a

double-edged sword. While nothing pressing was on his calendar, it also meant none of the parishioners needed his services.

“Nothing more we can do here,” declared the Lieutenant. “Come on, I’ll take you back to your car.”

The two atypical partners climbed back into Roscoe’s police sedan and drove back north to retrieve Father Ward’s car. Perhaps it was Father Ward’s inquisitive nature or maybe his innocence that made Lieutenant Roscoe adopt him as his informal partner.

Together, they were like the Odd Couple of Broadway fame. Spencer Roscoe, older, balding, with a spreading midsection, was tough. Hardened by years of battling crime, he was quick to fly off the handle. In contrast, Father James Ward was young, handsome, well-educated, and a master of his emotions.

Roscoe didn’t use the emergency beacon on the return trip, so the ride took a little longer. The twenty-minute trip started quietly, as each one contemplated the death of the woman differently. Roscoe wanted justice, Father Ward wanted redemption for the woman.

After a few minutes, Roscoe broke the silence. Once again, addressing Father Ward’s earlier meeting.

Roscoe continued to pry into Father Ward’s relationship with Janine O’Connell, asserting that any interaction Father Ward had with the District Attorney’s office was also police business. Father Ward didn’t agree. He wasn’t about to share her secret, no matter how much Roscoe pried. It was none of his business.

His final reply, "As I said, it's personal," seemed to put an end to the conversation.

While Roscoe's continued interest in his private life annoyed him, Father Ward chose to brush it off as part of the learning curve between two relatively new friends, even if he felt Roscoe was digging too deep, too soon. For the remainder of the ride, he stared out the window, offering infrequent remarks about the people and places they passed en route.

Dropping Father Ward off at the parking garage across from the county building, they parted company for the day. Yet Father Ward knew the investigation into Keshera's death was just beginning, and though Father Ward had church business to conduct, Lieutenant Roscoe would do everything he could to keep Father Ward involved.

Upon his return to the rectory, Martha inquired as to Father Ward's whereabouts. It concerned her that he was becoming so involved in police investigations. She felt his place was at the church doing church business.

It pained him to tell her another violent crime had occurred in the parish. Martha abhorred the way the police allowed the rooming house to remain in business when everyone knew what went on there. She made the sign of the cross, then whispered a short prayer for the victim.