

FOUR

The elevator doors opened onto the small hallway that contained the backdoor to Starbucks and a walkway to the hotel's main lobby. The coffee shop was closed to the public, as were the surrounding streets, but it did a brisk business from cops armed with automatic weapons and steaming cups of cappuccinos and lattes. Through the shop's front windows, I could see Jay's body lying on the roof of the car and rookie cops as they patrolled the empty street.

The crowded shop made me uncomfortable, I didn't want to walk through it, so I took the side emergency exit I came in earlier with Richard, and it put me back on Fleming Street. Capt. Steve Jones ran the situation from upstairs now.

Emergency lights flashed from police cars and armed men stood around the street, anxious for something to happen, while I walked toward Jack Flat's, knowing Tita hadn't waited. Maybe our relationship was off again, I hoped not, but knew whatever the result it was my fault.

The curious filled Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville bar, hanging out the large open window, drinks in hand, and jammed the sidewalk, staring up the half block toward the hotel; across the street, the entrance of Jack Flat's was crowded, too. I pushed my way through the outdoor collection of the curious and found weekend sports fans crowding the bar, as a dozen TVs played a variety of games. A handful of customers sat at tables, but Tita wasn't anywhere. Padre Thomas Collins sat alone at a back table and waved me over.

Padre Thomas is an Irish-born Jesuit who sees and talks to angels. An angel told him to walk away from his mission church in Guatemala years ago. He is a skinny, five-foot-eight, sunburned man in his late fifties, who chain-smokes Camel cigarettes and volunteers his services at St. Mary Star of the Sea's soup kitchen. His pale-blue eyes are the most intense I have ever seen and in the years I've known him, I have come to believe him about the angels.

A half glass of draft beer, and an opened package of cigarettes, was on the table, when I sat down. Hatless, he wore a blue, sleeveless, buttoned-down-collared dress shirt, extra packages

of cigarettes in the pocket, cargo shorts, and sandals, his usual attire. He cut the sleeves off the shirt himself. A nervous guy by nature, Padre Thomas looked horrible. Dark circles filled in pouches under his eyes, which were more red than blue.

Alexis Bolter, the waitress, brought me a Sam Adams and a bill.

“Tita said to give this to you.” She handed me the bill for a rum and Coke.

Scribbled on the back was one word, *Thanks!* I gave Alexis seven dollars and she walked away.

“Tita didn’t stay long.” Padre Thomas played with his cigarette package. “Have they found the body yet?”

“Which body?” I took a swallow of beer.

“The one they’re lookin’ for at the hotel.”

No cop would have told him what was going on, even if one knew. My conclusion, as unrealistic as it sounded, was the angels told him.

“Is that why you’re here?”

“In a way,” he mumbled, with a mouthful of beer. “I’m looking for you.”

His somber tone matched his trampled look.

“Well, you found me, what do you need?”

“A cigarette,” he smiled, and sipped his beer. “Do you believe in evil, Mick? I mean an evil it seems impossible to stop?” He rubbed his weary eyes.

I thought of Central and South American death squads, but said nothing about them.

“I see it every night on the news, in the Middle-East and Africa.”

“Could you see it here, in Key West?”

The noise from the sports fans made conversation difficult, but I clearly heard his words and the concern they carried. A lot of people thought Padre Thomas was either a fake or crazy, but for some reason he had chosen me as his confessor, and I’ve come to believe him to be

intelligent and sincere. In his own mind, he is a Jesuit who communicates with angels. He knew things that were unexplainable, unless you accepted the angels.

“No, Padre, I couldn’t.” I took a long pull from the bottle of beer. “What’s bothering you? You look horrible.”

“The evil isn’t coming, Mick, it’s already here.” He pulled a cigarette from the package and put it in his mouth. “Jay’s dead. I saw his body and there’s a dead cop inside the hotel.”

“How do you know the cop’s dead?”

He stared at me and his eyes almost came to life. He didn’t need to answer.

“Where’s her body?” It wouldn’t be the first time he helped solve a crime because of his knowledge.

“I don’t know.” He took his eyes away. “In a dark place that’s noisy.”

“You wanna take a walk, have a smoke?”

He nodded and picked up his package of cigarettes, the unlit one still dangling from his lips.

“How many beers have you had?”

I always seem to pick up his bar tabs.

“Three,” he said, and walked toward the exit.

I left Alexis twenty dollars under my empty beer bottle and followed Padre Thomas, curious about an evil that couldn’t be stopped.