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For All Our Sins

Written by T. M. E. Walsh

Published by Carina

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A DCI CLAIRE WINTERS THRILLER

For All Our Sins

T.M.E. WALSH

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Carina UK
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF
www.carinauk.com

This paperback edition 2016
1
First published in Great Britain by
Carina an imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers* 2016

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A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-263-92739-9

Set by CPI - Group(UK) Limited,
Printed and bound in Great Britain

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The room smelled of blood, so thick that she could almost taste it…

CHAPTER 1

‘Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.’

Amelia scarcely heard the words escape her mouth as she crossed herself and clasped the rosary tighter in her hands.

The little dark-red wooden beads didn’t give her the strength they once did. As she stared at the silver cross that dangled between her fingers, she knew her traditional faith in God had died a long time ago and part of her felt like a fraud.

From inside the confessional, Father Malcolm Wainwright shifted his weight awkwardly, but never broke his concentration. He continued to remain silent, awaiting the inevitable confession.

But the confession never came.

The silence felt as though it would swallow him whole. He turned his head slightly, peering through the ornate carvings of the wooden partition, but could see little in the darkness.

His eyes were not what they used to be but he could just make out the outline of her face, and where the light crept through the small cracks in the wood, he saw the most beautiful shade of red hair. Like fire, it seemed to reflect in his eyes, flecks of light dancing across his iris.

‘Take your time, my child. Trust in God.’

Amelia closed her eyes, squeezed her rosary, but remained silent.

Then she turned to face him, her hands placed flat against the partition, her fingertips poking through the spaces in the wood.

The cross on the rosary was swaying back and forth against the wood, like a crude attempt at Morse code.

Wainwright saw her eyes for the first time as a stray beam of light caught the brightest shades of green, the colour of a turquoise sea.

Her eyes started to mist as she brought her face closer, her breathing heavy, her lips just inches from his face.

'Do you remember the girl, Father?' Her voice rasped from within her throat as her demeanour changed.

Wainwright frowned as Amelia contorted her body, until she was pressed against the wooden partition.

'You remember, Father? She tried to tell, to cry for help.' Her voice began to rise. 'There were times you could've stopped it. All the pain she suffered… You had the chance to set her soul free, but instead you did nothing.'

Wainwright felt the air in the room change, and for the first time in all his years in the ministry, he felt what could only be described as fear.

What could I have done?

Amelia saw the recognition flicker across his eyes. Her mouth pulled into a grin, her eyes knowing. 'There's blood on your hands, Father. Can't you smell it, feel it on your skin?'

Wainwright snapped.

'You've mistaken me for someone else,' he said, trying to control his voice. 'I want you to leave immediately and…' He trailed off as he heard someone approach the curtain to his compartment.

The last thing Wainwright saw was the flash of light against the steel of a slim blade as the curtain was pulled aside, just seconds before the knife tore through his robes and sliced through his withered skin.

Pain ripped through every muscle in his body. As blood soaked through his garments, he swore he could feel his soul screaming for release.

Looking up to see his attacker he saw only the woman, now standing in front of him. Her hair was like fire with the glow of sunlight cascading through the stained-glass windows behind her.

She grasped his hair, slammed his head back against the confessional, and brought her face closer to his. Despite the pain in his body, he could smell her sweet perfume so vividly.

'You remember this face, Father.' Her lips were just inches away from his. 'Do you remember these eyes? My voice?'

Wainwright tried to scream but blood pooled in his throat, a thick taste of copper.

He knew her. And he silently damned her to Hell.

His eyelids fluttered involuntary as the energy began to drain from his body.

'What does it feel like to hurt, Father? The pain you feel is nothing compared to the years of torment you let be inflicted on the innocent. Too many years you've kept that secret that stops you from sleeping at night.' She shook her head. 'There's blood on your hands, priest…you shouldn't have helped him that day.'

Tears pricked Wainwright's eyes. *How does she know? There were only three there that day…and the other.*

Amelia took the cross hanging from her rosary and pressed it hard against his dry lips.

Wainwright's eyes widened, begging in silent prayer for forgiveness.

'For all the years you've preached your poison, and for the tormented souls who will never be free from your idea of faith, I shall unite you with God, and *He* will decide the punishment for your soul.'

Wainwright tried to fight her off as she forced the cross past his lips and into his throat. Much stronger than she appeared, Amelia pushed his jaw up hard, and pulled on the rosary beads until they broke free.

They scattered to the floor, dancing over the flagstones, as he began to choke.

His lungs felt like they were on fire, desperate for air. He fell to his knees, his hands reaching up and clutching at Amelia's clothes.

She stepped back and watched him crawl after her, one hand at his throat and the other reaching out, silently begging.

Amelia's face was resolute as he wheezed and spluttered, his face turning vivid shades of blue and purple. He collapsed face down, his forehead hitting the flagstones hard. His eyes felt heavy. He let them close, as his breath slowed to a whisper.

Wainwright's last thoughts were not of his childhood or a fond trip down memory lane. They were of a moment in a not so distant part of history.

Yes, Wainwright remembered her.

He also remembered a large oak staircase bathed in blood and a door closing, containing the screams within. Even now he knew it was too late to repent and change the fate of his soul.

He recalled a quote he'd read once. Something that had stayed with him all this time, scratching away in the back of his mind: *The dead cannot cry out for justice. It is a duty of the living to do so for them.*

Subconsciously, Wainwright had always known that one day his past would come back to haunt him.

Now the time had come, he welcomed it with open arms.

CHAPTER 2

Ice-blue irises pulled tight leaving the pupils the size of a pin prick as she stared skyward, hand raised to her brow, useless against the might of the sun's rays.

Detective Chief Inspector Claire Winters felt a shiver shoot up her spine, like icy skeletal fingers scraping against her skin, despite the heat of the day. It was early morning, but the temperature on the dash of her car had said it was close to twenty-four degrees already.

Her shirt was sticking to her back underneath her suit jacket like a second skin. The air was muggy, close, pulling at each breath she took, yet despite this she still felt like ice, right down to her bones.

A feeling of dread pulled at her inside as she lowered the sunglasses from the top of her head back down on her face.

She stared at the door ahead, the entrance to the looming tower block opposite her. A place she'd just left. A place she hated. A place that had become more somewhere to call home than her house several miles out of Haverbridge.

Claire's mind drifted to dark thoughts. They came thick and fast lately. Like a nightmare that didn't end after she woke each morning. It continued long through the days. Sometimes it threatened to swallow her whole.

Sometimes Claire wondered if perhaps that'd be easier.

Just let all the fight be torn out of her and scattered to the wind, until all that remained was an empty shell.

Wouldn't that be too easy?

She felt her BlackBerry vibrating inside her trouser pocket. She'd turned the ringer off whilst she'd been inside the building, inside that wretched flat that housed someone she'd long since come to loathe and love in equal measure.

She glanced at the screen; her grip tightened on the phone resting in her palm. Her finger hovered over the *Answer* button.

How easy it would be to just throw it away, forget her job, forget this life. Forget everything that'd passed and start again.

This is not you, she told herself. *He does not define who you are, what you do, what comes next*. She glanced up at the tower block again as she answered the call.

Take back the control.

'DCI Winters,' she said. Her lips were dry, cracked, sore. She touched her fingers on her free hand to her bottom lip, pulled them away. Tiny dots of blood were on her fingertips.

'Guv?' said Detective Constable Gabriel Harper at the other end of the phone.

Claire snapped back to the here and now. She'd detected something in his voice that was different. Whatever he was going to say, wasn't going to be good.

'What is it, Gabe?'

There was a drawn-out pause. Claire could hear his breathing. It was far from normal. A new sensation gripped at her insides. She bit down on her bottom lip, made herself turn away from the tower block.

'What's wrong, Harper?' she said as she crossed the road towards where she'd parked her car earlier, a steely edge returning to her voice.

She heard Harper's sharp intake of breath. 'Guv, this isn't something I can explain over the phone.' He paused. 'We need you back now, something's happened at one of the local churches. Reports are coming in about a woman collapsing outside St Mary's, completely covered in blood…someone else's, not her own.'

CHAPTER 3

The coffee was like lava over his tongue, scorching the roof of his mouth, but for Detective Sergeant Michael Diego there were worse things in life than bad coffee.

With his unwashed hair and two-day-old stubble, he was still a handsome man, but the insomnia suffered last night through to the early hours of this morning was taking its toll before the clock had struck nine this morning.

He'd been out of the office for a few hours, and now that he was back in time for lunch, he didn't feel like working.

Haverbridge had that effect on him. Nestled in the county of Hertfordshire, the large town was fast becoming a magnet for outsiders and, despite the recession, a construction haven.

Just thirty miles north of London, Haverbridge was attracting people from all walks of life and, being somewhat averse to change, Michael barely raised a smile at the prospect of more investment in his home town, despite the prosperity it could bring.

He hated what was overflowing from the London boroughs. He liked the old, hated the new.

Modernisation was something he was reluctant to adapt to. Like Haverbridge Police Station's CID room, situated on the second floor in a modern part of the building.

It was a recent extension to the original building that'd been updated and refurbished despite impending

government cuts, and, although it was fairly spacious, Michael always felt claustrophobic in it.

He knew it was something that came from an experience rooted deep in his past.

Something he didn't like to dwell on. He tried to push it from his thoughts.

He turned to glance around the room, and sipped his coffee.

The walls were lined with maps, photographs and notes for ongoing inquiries, including several pictures from the case he was investigating. He saw the photograph of the suspect involved, whose eyes looked like they would burn holes in Michael's flesh and carve his name on his soul.

Pushing the thoughts from his head, his eyes swept over the room again. There were groups of desks broken up in sections for detective constables, sergeants and inspectors, and behind floor-to-ceiling glass wall partitions was Detective Chief Inspector Claire Winters's office.

Her lair.

There she could keep an eye on him, watch his every move.

But not today. Not so far anyway. In fact he didn't know where half the people were right now for that matter. Harper had been rushing off to his car when Michael had reached the station, something too urgent to wait.

It wasn't Harper that bothered him anyway. It was Claire.

He hadn't even caught a glimpse of her, which, whilst it was unnerving, pleased him somewhat. He conceded that he was just too tired to fight with her today, although part of him still enjoyed the banter.

He walked back to his desk and slumped down in his chair. He flicked the switch on the old desk fan beside him. It blew warm air at his face but it was better than nothing.

He grinned to himself. All the money that'd been spent on this new office, with air con, and it chooses one of the hottest days in August to break down. Change wasn't always for the better.

He pressed the plastic cup to his lips, drinking the rest of his coffee in one go. He crushed the cup in his palm and, aiming it at the wastepaper basket, he threw it. The crushed cup hit the rim then fell on the floor.

Shit.

He needed sleep. *Quality* sleep, not just a few captured hours while working a case in the early hours of the morning, while living off a diet of caffeine and cigarettes.

Michael looked at his reflection in the window next to him, which overlooked the station's car park.

He looked terrible, even by his own standards.

Dark circles created the illusion of crescent moons under his brown eyes, and the corners of his mouth were turned down in a fixed sorrowful pout.

He returned his gaze to his desk, which was cluttered and stacked high with paper and files. There were dirty coffee-ring marks on the wood and month-old dust congregating around his computer monitor and keyboard.

Michael hated computers.

Computers were for the ones who were no more than a number on the payroll system. Michael was more than that and he knew it, and he had no time for modesty. Not in this job.

He was disturbed from his thoughts by the vibrating of his mobile phone in his pocket.

He glanced at the caller ID.

Claire Winters. So much for not locking horns with her today.

He sighed and tried to ignore it. After the call failed to divert to his voicemail, he decided to answer it.

'Where have you been, Diego?'

In a bad mood, as per-fucking-usual…

'Sorry, Guv, I've been out of the office for a bit and I've been ignoring my phone, trying to catch up on work.'

'Well you'd better pull your finger out your arse and get down here. I'm on Ryder Way, St Mary's church.'

Michael paused, rubbing his eyes hard as a headache began to emerge, crossing over his forehead. The blood in his ears began to pound. 'What's going on?'

'We found a body.'

'Claire, I'm working on the Hargreaves case, do I really need to be down there?' He heard her sharp intake of breath and cursed himself in his head.

That was not the attitude to show the Guv right now, or ever.

She could bust your balls just by giving you one icy look from her emotionless blue eyes. He awaited the inevitable lashing of her tongue.

'Look,' she said, 'I've had a rough morning. Don't be another pain in my arse.'

Michael paused. 'Where *have* you been anyway?'

'It's…it's personal.'

'Something wrong? You can tell me.'

She paused, part of her wanting to offload her frustrations of the morning, but then her resolve hardened. 'What are you, my therapist? Just drop what you're doing and get down here.'

He bristled at her words, his shoulders locking up. He lowered his voice so the next words out of his mouth came in a forceful hiss. 'I can't just drop everything. I've been working flat out and I'm *this* close,' he said, miming a small distance between his thumb and finger, despite knowing she couldn't see, 'from getting the lead we've been after. The Hargreaves case needs—'

'*Fuck* the Hargreaves case,' she cut in, her patience waning. 'I'll reassign it to Matthews.'

Michael was silent, his face twisted. His eyes wandered back to the picture on the wall he'd studied earlier.

Gavin Hargreaves was a local thug, dealer and complete thorn in his side.

He was a man who'd been in and out of police custody for years, served a prison sentence for a drug-related offence, but this hadn't deterred him. He carried on with his little enterprise, controlling Haverbridge's seedy underbelly, and he'd just been accused of a serious assault.

Trouble was there were no witnesses and little evidence of Hargreaves's involvement. If they wanted Hargreaves away for a long time, they had to gather more evidence than they had already but it was a shitty investigation.

No one would put the finger on Hargreaves, such was his power and the fear he exerted over those in his pocket. Even local gangs feared him.

Michael had been working the Hargreaves case for two months now and had no intention of letting it go to anyone, especially not DI David Matthews.

Claire sensed his anger in the silence. She let him stew a few more moments before she gave a half smile.

'Trust me, Diego, you'll want to take this one. Right up your street.'

'You've lost me,' he said, beginning to lose patience.

'When was the last time you went to church?'

'Why?'

She paused then said, 'The deceased was a priest.'