



BEFORE
I
WAKE

CLARE REVELL

SAY A PRAYER whodunit #3

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Dedication

For Marion - my other crit partner in crime. Also
known as the comma slayer....

What People are Saying

Friday's Child ~ Pi's story was great... or should I say Agent 3.14. An absolutely divine story of what happens when God is in control. Heartache, murder, mystery and forgiveness make up this intriguing tale that keeps you guessing all the way through... some things I could sense coming, others caught me completely by surprise. ~ Joelle Teague

Thursdays Child~ Ms. Revell has certainly twisted a real heartbreaker here while keeping some deep, dark secrets hidden from us. First, what could be more heartbreaking than an emergency responder not being able to help a loved one in a life threatening, touch and go situation? And this is just the opening! ~ Donna B. Snow

*Now I lay me down to sleep.
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.
If I should live for other days,
I pray the Lord to guide my ways.
~ Traditional Child's Prayer*

1

I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me. ~ Psalm 3:5

Detective Constable Isabel York stood motionless—victim number six on the ground by her feet. She knew she ought to feel something—anything—but only guilt consumed her. This death was on her, having literally occurred on her watch.

The body of Lexi Eke knelt posed in prayer with the word “guilty” written in black ink on her forehead. That, along with the white towelling baptismal robe, grey duct tape bonds, and clean feet matched the other victims of the Prayer Slayer. The only difference was the head wound and the blood staining the white dress.

Isabel swallowed hard. They’d been here the whole time. For two days her unit had staked out the chapel and grounds of Headley Baptist Church. She’d been sitting mere feet away for several hours, yet still the woman had died. Not with only Isabel on duty either. A dozen other police officers had been watching the churchyard and buildings after the Slayer’s latest postcard—a picture of where he would leave his next victim along with a clue as to her apparent crime—had arrived on Isabel’s desk.

Isabel glanced around her, hunting for the painting. Each of the five previous victims had been left next to one of the stolen paintings from a series entitled the Ten Commandments. If the Slayer was responsible, there would be a sixth painting. She flipped on her torch to search the ground properly.

One good thing was most of the kids from the church youth group had gone home now. It had been a judgment call, letting normal church activities carry on whilst the building and grounds were under surveillance. The Slayer had sent them a photo of the church. They knew the latest girl would be found and killed here. They'd hoped to stop him without tipping him off as to their presence. They'd been wrong.

The three teenagers who'd found the body were talking to her senior officer, DI Holmes, who was also one of the church elders.

Something glinted in the dark grass. Isabel bent down, moving the grass gently aside. A syringe. Her heart raced. She'd been on the wrong end of one of those only a few weeks ago. Reaching into her pocket, she withdrew an evidence bag. She pulled a tissue out of her pocket, carefully picked up the syringe and slid it inside the plastic bag.

Her partner DC Zander Ellery dashed over, his feet thudding on the ground. "Anything turn up yet?"

"No painting so far. I did find this." Isabel held up the now sealed bag. "I guess we should be grateful the teenagers from the youth group didn't find it. Or see him actually killing her." She frowned at the blood on Zander's shirt. "You really should get something done about those nosebleeds of yours. We'll make you a doctor's appointment on Monday."

Zander glanced down. "Hmmm. Maybe your high

blood pressure is catching.”

She frowned. “And maybe you really are the Slayer and that blood is hers.” As much as the squad joked about the possibility of the killer and her partner being the same person, Zander did have a habit of vanishing just before a body was discovered.

“Ha ha,” he groaned. “That joke is wearing a little thin now. I’m not the Slayer.”

Isabel shone the torch into the undergrowth. “Hey. I’m not saying I have superpowers. I’m just saying no one has seen me and any woman with superpowers in a room at the same time.”

Zander snorted derisively, in the way that only he could. “And there I was thinking your alter ego was Superbell.”

“Oh, my bad.” Her torch illuminated the painting. “Here you go. And just as weird as the photo in the art gallery catalogue. It looks like a funeral for a crow or something.”

Zander flicked to the list in his notebook. “It’s called *a murder of crows*. It depicts the slaying of the vicar crow in a church yard.”

Isabel peered at the painting. “That doesn’t look right.”

Her partner frowned confused. “What doesn’t?”

“There’s something wrong with this one.”

“Bag it and we’ll take it with us,” Zander said. “Maybe you’ll see what you’re looking for better in the daylight.”

“It’s possible.” She straightened and slid the painting into a large, clear plastic bag. “Do we have postcards of the set of paintings? They’d be bigger and easier to compare than the tiny ones in the brochure we have.”

"No, we don't. However, I can pick up a set from the gallery. Farrell will probably charge us for them, but petty cash will cover it."

"First thing in the morning on the way into work."

He shook his head. "It's Sunday. It'll be closed." A slight smile crossed his lips. "Gone are the days when the whole country shut on a Sunday and a Wednesday afternoon."

"Fine. Monday, then." She shoved the disquiet back in her mind and forced the lid down tight.

Pastor Jack Chambers came over. He looked green, the shock and horror etched on his face and in his eyes aging him ten years. "Is the..." His voice tailed off and he coughed to clear his throat as his gaze fell on the body. He turned slightly away. "Is there anything I can do?"

Zander shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Pastor. Except pray for her family. You'll need to find an alternative venue for the services for tomorrow and the rest of the week, and probably next week or two as well. The church and entire grounds are a crime scene now." He turned to Isabel. "You all right here for a few?"

Isabel nodded. She'd spent virtually the entire evening alone while he was off doing who knows what, even though he was meant to be keeping watch with her. Not that keeping watch had made any difference. Lexi was still dead. Victim number six. Once again, a weighty load of guilt descended and settled on her shoulders. Would they ever catch this bloke?

Zander and Pastor Jack headed across the car park to where the other pastor, Carson Armitage, had just arrived.

Isabel turned back to the painting. She shone her torch over it and shivered. She'd studied the brochure containing the paintings so many times she knew them by heart. But there was something different about this one.

The coroner, Arend Van Houten, appeared beside her. "Isabel." His Dutch accent was almost musical tonight. "Wish I could say it was a pleasure."

She glanced at him. "Hi, Arend. How are you?"

"Fine, but I can think of better ways to spend a Saturday night."

"Oh, I don't know." Isabel tilted her head as her boss, DI Holmes, crossed the car park towards them. "Sit in a car all night. Alone. Play noughts and crosses. Alone. Wonder where your partner has got to this time. Alone. Oh, and then wonder how we managed to not notice this happening right under our noses." She shoved a hand through her hair. "It's a great way to spend a Saturday night if you ask me."

"I thought Zander was with you." DI Holmes sounded curt, annoyed, tired and stressed. For a while they'd thought the next victim would be his wife. The man was probably relieved it wasn't, and then feeling guilty for that.

"He was some of the time. He drank too much coffee, had another nosebleed, and now has blood all over his shirt. If I'm honest, sir, I have no idea where he was for the majority of the stakeout."

"Hmmm." DI Holmes forehead creased as he frowned. "What have we got, Arend?"

"Head wound," Arend told him. "Something the other five women didn't have. Plenty of blood on her dress, but then head wounds do bleed."

"The killer left the syringe. I bagged it and left it

where it was," Isabel added. "I also bagged the painting, and marked the spot where it was found, but I need to take it with me."

Her senior officer did the trademark rolled eyes and heavy sigh. "Isabel..."

She held up a hand to deflect some of his irritation. "I know what you're going to say, sir, but I'm not apologising. I know it's not protocol, and you'll have my guts for garters for tampering with a crime scene but call it a hunch. I have a good reason for this, and I'll lock it away myself for safe keeping."

"Where's Zander?"

"Talking to Pastor Jack and Pastor Carson."

DI Holmes nodded curtly. "I understand you knew the victim?"

"Yes, sir. Her name was Lexi Eke. She was the home help we employed for Gran and Mr. Mac — Zander's grandfather. I tried leaving her messages after Mr. Mac was attacked, but she never returned them. It's possible she was snatched from his place."

He nodded. "We'll worry about that in the morning. Right now, I need you and Zander to go and do the notification."

"Now?" She glanced at her watch. "It's late."

"Better they hear it tonight before the press catch wind of it and it's all over the news."

"Yes, sir." She glanced at Zander as he came back. His shirt sleeves were rolled to his elbows, the blood on his shirt glowing in the lights that SOCO had set up. "You're a mess. Guv wants us to go and do the notification now."

"Change your shirt first," DI Holmes told him. "And log that painting in as well."

"I have a spare shirt in the car." Zander stared at

DI Holmes. "I suppose you want this one bagged and DNA checked in case it's her blood."

"Why would I want that?" DI Holmes frown deepened.

"You must have heard the 'Zander is the Prayer Slayer' rumours going around the squad room."

"Heard and ignored. Just change."

Zander headed back to the car, Isabel keeping pace. "Do we know where she lives?"

"Yes. She lives with her parents. Seven Raggleswood Close."

Zander unlocked the car and yanked open the boot. He stripped off, tossing his soiled shirt inside next to his jacket. He reached into his gym bag and pulled out a polo shirt. "Not perfect but it'll do. I want to check on Gramps at some point if that's OK."

"It's fine. We can do that on the way home. Use the police ID card as its way past visiting time now. Depending what time we finish, might be easier to go and visit tomorrow."

"Maybe." A hint of reluctance resonated in his voice. He glanced at his watch. "Yeah, tomorrow."

She laid the painting into the boot, and then headed around the side of the car. She climbed in, shutting the door before reaching for her seatbelt.

A few seconds later, Zander joined her. He shut the door firmly and shoved the keys into the ignition. "OK. Time to go shatter someone's life."

~*~

Zander sat opposite Lexi's parents; his hands clenched on his lap. This never got easier, no matter how many notifications he did. The one part of the job

he hated with a passion. Mrs. Eke clung to her husband sobbing like a child, while he perched on the edge of the couch, staring across at the far wall. Zander glanced over at Isabel. They needed to give them some space.

Isabel fortunately was quick on the uptake. "Can we take a look at her room?"

Mr. Eke nodded. "Top of the stairs. Second door on the right."

Zander headed up the stairs, Isabel at his heels. He pulled on latex gloves as he climbed. At least he wasn't allergic to them. There was talk of just wearing the blue gloves as standard now, as those were latex free. No matter how many times he'd done this part of police work, it still seemed wrong. Going into someone's room shortly after they'd died. Seeing it just as they'd left it that morning. Knowing they'd never come back.

Lexi's room was neat and tidy, her bed made. There was no mess or piles of stuff waiting to be put away. Her Bible lay next to the bed.

"It's not just other people's homes she kept tidy," Zander commented.

"It's tidier than my entire flat," Isabel retorted.

"That wouldn't be hard if your desk is anything to go by." He turned around, taking in the whole room. "Does something seem off to you?"

"Aside from her father's non-reaction?" Isabel pulled open the chest of drawers. "No grief, no anger, no nothing."

"Other than the Bible, there are no personal touches at all. No books or makeup or pictures or perfume. Nothing." He checked the wardrobe. "Not much here either. It's mainly uniform and a church dress."

"Same with the drawers." Isabel turned to look at him. "I mean I know it's meant to be a minimum of three sets of everything. One on, one off, and one in the wash, but this is taking it to the extreme. Unless she's got an awful lot in the wash, it's all the same. Underwear, T-shirts, and so on. Never any more than three."

She frowned. "It's like they don't believe in expense or extravagance. Just the bare minimum."

"We should get back downstairs." Zander left the room and headed down to the lounge.

Mr. and Mrs. Eke sat where he'd left them.

"I need to ask you some questions."

"Of course." Mr. Eke looked at him blankly, voice totally expressionless.

Zander pulled out his notebook, passing it to Isabel. He ignored the pained look she gave him. Someone needed to take notes and it wouldn't be him this time. "When did you last see Lexi?"

"Thursday morning," Mr. Eke replied. "When she went to work. She was staying at a friend's for the weekend, so she took a few days holiday."

"Which friend?" Isabel asked.

"Susan." Her father pointed to the fireplace. "Her brother's a painter. Lexi got the picture over the mantel for her birthday. We don't normally accept gifts, but they insisted. And Lexi was adamant it hung here rather in her room, which we would have preferred."

Zander wandered across and peered at the painting. He recognised the style from the pictures in the brochure but wanted to double check the signature. Too much of a coincidence to make an assumption, but he was right. This one was a landscape, of a church on a hillside. Thick black oppressive clouds swirled

overhead. Faint rays of sunshine battled their way through at the side. "It's a Dominic Higgins. I thought it was as I'm familiar with his work."

Mr. Eke nodded. "Yes. Lexi and Susan went to school together."

"Do you have an address for Susan? We'll need to speak to her as well."

"Somewhere." Mr. Eke turned to his wife. "Find it."

Zander struggled not to frown at the terse command. No please, or a dear, or even using her name.

The woman merely nodded and stood up to do as her husband asked.

"We'll also need to speak with Lexi's boyfriend," Isabel said.

"She had no boyfriend." Mr. Eke turned his fierce gaze onto Isabel. "She was a good girl. Very active in my church. I'm the vicar of St. Crispin's. She's never been interested in boys—at least not the way you're implying."

Isabel stared at him. "The last time I spoke to her, she told me about her boyfriend. So, we really do need to speak with him."

"You knew my daughter?" Mrs. Eke glanced at them and spoke for the first time since they'd arrived.

"Yes. She used to be my Gran's home help. She also worked with DC Ellery's grandfather."

"It's a wonderful work she's doing. Caring for the elderly," Mr. Eke spoke before his wife had chance to even open her mouth again. "It's a shame more children don't care for their parents the same way. Do you, DC York?"

"I'm an orphan," Isabel replied. "It's just me since

Gran died."

"And my parents are fine," Zander said quickly, before the man picked on him as well. "I saw Mum just this afternoon."

"1 Timothy 5:4 says, but if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God."

Zander changed the subject. "Do you have an up to date photo of Lexi we could have? Maybe one that shows her necklace?"

Mr. Eke frowned. "Another expensive trinket, a gift she had no business accepting. Or keeping. It's a sign of vanity and that's a sin."

Mrs. Eke crossed the room back to them. She held out a photo. "Here's one. And Susan's address."

Isabel took them. "Thank you. If you don't mind me asking, who gave her the pendant?"

"She never said, but she wore it constantly." Mrs. Eke glanced nervously at her husband.

Zander sprang to his feet and held out one of his cards. "Once again, we're sorry for your loss. If you need to ask us anything, this is where you can find us."

He waited until they were in the car before glancing at Isabel as the curtains twitched. "We're being watched. Probably best we don't sit here and talk." He shoved the keys into the ignition and pulled away from the kerb. "Now is that just me, or was that more than a little strange?"

"Downright peculiar is more like it." Isabel eased back in her seat. "She was distraught, and he was emotionless. Are we going to Susan Higgins' place?"

Zander glanced at the clock on the dashboard. "It's