

*The
Black
Madonna*©

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Serial-*

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THE BLACK MADONNA

The original church was built as a mission by French Jesuit priests before the Louisiana Purchase. The hurricane that hit Galveston, Texas in 1900 spawned a small freak tornado that almost completely destroyed the mission. Determined parishioners rebuilt the church as it stands today, modest in size, spectacularly ornate. The centerpiece was a life-size statue of Mother Mary above the altar, gazing lovingly down at the baby Jesus in her arms.

I was disappointed to see a white Madonna in the chapel as Paul and I entered. I suspected another dead end.

A young priest was busy in the chapel as we walked in. He looked at us and smiled. "*Bonjour, Messieurs!*" he greeted us warmly.

"*Bonjour, mon Pere,*" Paul responded in kind.

Pere. French for father. You could have knocked me over with a feather. I recognized the homonym instantly. *Pair pare pear pere.* Our search was beginning to bear fruit. I was sure of it.

"May I help you, *mes fils?*"

"Yes, father," I began. "I believe you can. We were directed here by my brother-in-law, James Barron. His sister and I were married here. Does any of this ring a bell?"

"And your name is?"

"Tyrone Sullivan. My wife's name is Julia."

He pondered silently. "I'm sorry. I was only assigned here six months ago. Perhaps Father Damien can help you. Please wait here a moment; be seated if you like.

I'll tell Father Damien you're here on my way out. I'm expected soon at the soup kitchen over in the ninth ward."

I recognized Father Damien immediately as he stepped into the chapel wearing the traditional Jesuit robe. His last name was Leclerc, and it was he who married me and Julia. I scolded myself mentally for forgetting. His beatific smile and kind eyes brought back fond memories of a festive event. Lady Madonna's beauty and serenity had nothing on Julia on her wedding day.

"Father *Jean* tells me you are looking for me."

"Yes, father. Do you recall a man named James Barron?"

His smile brightened. "How could I ever forget? He gave us a most marvelous gift. Come, let me show you!"

We proceeded to a recess where the wall was covered with paintings and photos of the Pope and former parish priests. Centered in the display was a beautiful icon of the virgin, adorned with a golden crown studded with diamonds, and ebony skin. The Black Madonna. An icon among the people.

"That's fantastic," I observed.

"Yes," Father Damien agreed, "a real treasure. We have been unable to ascertain the exact origin, but it is authentic."

"How much is it worth?"

"Worth?" The question seemed to baffle him. "Do you believe in God, my son?"

"Uh, not really," I admitted, feeling sheepish.

"Then perhaps a quarter million dollars or so. To a Catholic, to a believer, it is priceless."

"I see." I glanced at Paul, who caught the signal.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," he intoned. "It has been a long time since my last confession." He knelt at the priest's feet and crossed himself. Christ, I could kiss him. What an actor.

Father Damien put his hand to Paul's shoulder and bid him rise. "And you, my son?" he asked me.

"No thanks, father. My wife loved me at all times no matter what. I figure that

absolves me of all my sins."

"Perhaps," he conceded without further comment. "Would you be kind enough to excuse us?" he asked me.

"Sure. I'll be fine right here."

They went into the confessional. I expected the priest to get his ears blistered. As soon as I heard Paul speaking in low monotones, I carefully took down the icon and looked it over. The back of the frame was covered with aged paper. Both it and the glue were original, so far as I could tell. There wasn't a clue. As I examined it carefully, though, something faint caught my eye. I angled it to the light. Someone had lightly penciled "Walker's Funeral Home" in the bottom right corner. It was nearly invisible. I assumed that no one had erased it for fear of desecrating the idol. Maybe they just didn't notice it. I put the icon back on the wall just as it had been.

As soon as Paul had finished confessing his sins, we exited the church waving goodbyes to the saintly priest. I turned to Paul. "Well, do you feel all better now?"

"*Ah, oui.* Much better than better."

"What do you mean?"

"I paid for an indulgence."

"An indulgence?"

"Yes. The next killing is free."

"Excellent. You may be needing that."

We caught a cab to the Latin Quarter and went to a cozy little jazz club called *Chez Ty--Ty's Place*. I used to hang out there a lot, feeling very much at home in my namesake. It was actually named for a principal investor who became famous playing America's favorite pastime during the early 1900's. His surname was Cobb. I got a phonebook from the bartender and thumbed through the yellow pages until I found Walker's Funeral Home listed. After a round or two, we caught another cab and headed over to the ninth ward. When we reached our destination, I paid the cabbie to wait.

The funeral home was in the middle of the black neighborhood, and like the churches it was a valued asset to the community. It was expansive, attractive, and tastefully constructed on a well manicured lawn shaded by mammoth trees.

A rotund black man with cotton white hair was helping a black youth wash a vehicle in the circular drive, which seemed pointless to me. The sky was occluded. Foul weather was closing in on mounting winds. He looked up and smiled as we approached. "Good morning, gentlemen."

"Good morning. Crawford Walker?"

"Yes."

"Do you have a few minutes to talk with us?"

"What is this about?"

"Relax, man. We're not with the police or anything like that. James Barron is my brother-in-law. Do you know him?"

He tossed his sponge into a pail of soapy water and shook his head. "Lawd have mercy!" His shoulders shook with laughter. "Know him?" he asked, as though it was silly to even ask. "Y'all come on inside, now. Let's go around through the back so's I can get some of this mess off me."

It was cool and serene in his plush office, where he quickly cleaned up and slipped on slacks, loafers without socks, and a dashiki shirt in the bathroom.

"So, you knew Jimmy?" I asked when he reappeared.

"Jimmy and I served together in the Army."

"First Cavalry?"

"God, yes. Seems like a hundred years ago."

"Well, I'm sorry to have to inform you, but Jimmy has gone the way of all flesh."

Crawford looked very sad. "Mm mm," he mumbled, shaking his head.

We all just sat there looking at each other momentarily.

"Anyway," I prompted him, "he always said that if I was ever down this way, I should drop in and say hello."

"Jim helped me set up this business after the war. We didn't have a lot of money back then, but we pooled our GI bill loans, and later on he left some collateral just in case the economy went south."

"Collateral?"

"Yeah. Come on, I'll show you. You like cars?"

"Who doesn't?"

"You'll like this."

We stepped out into the grand entranceway, well appointed with huge potted plants. There, on a highly polished floor, were two highly polished vintage hearses. One was a 1926 Chrysler "60," and the other a 1930 Nash 480 super six, both restored to showroom perfection. Both had coffins of high luster on prominent display on the glassed-in beds. They were mounted on subtle stands with the wheels suspended above the floor.

Paul and I both whistled. Hearse - a rhyme within the verse. Shit, oh dear! "You move or drive these much?" I asked.

"No!" he scoffed. "Keep 'em up, leave 'em alone, Jimmy said. They's too heavy to move bouts anyway. Jimmy's got somethin' private in them coffins that he don't want fooled with, he said. I figured guns and ammo. He was crazy about both. Always good for cash in a pinch. I didn't ask. None of my business. He say don't touch 'em, I doesn't touch 'em. We was friends like that."

"Hell of a nice display!" Paul said.

"Clients like it, alright," Crawford agreed.

"Me, too," I joined. Hiding in plain sight in a black population. Riding in black. Jimmy, you devil, you. The more I discovered about him, the more I missed him. I wished to God I could get this matter all cleared up, then go back and talk to him about it while we got drunk together again. We'd laugh our asses off. The more I missed him, the more I missed Julia.

Riding back to the city in the cab, Paul turned to me. "The gold..."

"Yeah," I agreed quickly, cutting him off from speaking in the cabbie's hearing. "Jimmy left a will leaving everything to Julia. I found it among her effects."

"That means..."

"Everything that was his is now ours."

"Ours?" he fairly shouted.

"Oui. Bien sûr! Nous sommes freres, n'est-ce pas?"

Paul flushed beet red and smiled brighter than I'd ever seen before. "Yes, we are

brothers, Ty. We live or die together, *mon ami...mon frere.*"

"You bet your sweet ass."

"But, one thing puzzles me, Ty."

"Yes?"

"If Jimmy had all this treasure, why did he live like a fucking pauper?"

"You don't know Jimmy very well. He'd give you the shirt off his back. If three guys in a foxhole had only one can of beans - his can of beans, they'd each get a third. Ask any of his Army comrades. Jimmy didn't have this fortune for him, he had it for them."

"Them?"

"His Vietnamese woman and child and him. His family. If they had nothing, he had nothing. He was like that."

"I wish I had known him better."

"We have the obligation now of getting his family to the states."

"And now it may be possible, *non?*"

"Yes."

"Why didn't he just do it?"

"Perhaps he did. He said in the poem to bring them back."

"But..."

"Hell, I don't know, but we'll find out."

As we drove along, we noticed persons everywhere batting down the hatches, making preparations for the imminent hurricane. The roads were becoming choked with traffic fleeing the city. I had the taxi drop us off at the Ritz Carlton. It was raining hard now, and the winds were ferocious. I figured we had time enough for a quick stop. In anticipation of this, I had parked my Cadillac just up the block. When I enquired about Paddy at the front desk, we were invited up to his room. He greeted us warmly at the door and invited us on in. It was a large, elegant suite with a living room and separate bedroom, the door to which was closed.

"Care for a drink?"

"Oh, hell yeah. Scotch."

"Rum," Paul requested.

Paddy walked over to the bar and began fixing drinks. His suitcases were on the bed, packed. He placed a call to the concierge to have them taken to the foyer. As soon as the bellhop left with them, he sat down and offered us a seat.

"Getting out of Dodge, eh?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. You caught me just in the nick. I waited until the last minute in case you dropped by. Just one little bit of business to conclude, then I'll be on my way."

"How did you know I'd be in town?"

The back bedroom opened. Four thugs entered with guns drawn. I had intended to tie up some loose ends, and now I found myself all tangled up in them.

"Actually, I knew you were in town. I've had you followed ever since you left the whore house. You've been very busy."

"Well, aren't you the clever little fucking Leprechaun?"

A thug slapped me in the head with his revolver, ringing my chimes.

"Now, now," Paddy remonstrated, "I'm sure violence won't be necessary." His sarcasm implied quite the opposite.

"What the fuck do you want, asshole?" I demanded.

"You know precisely what I want. I told you before. Jimmy has some things that belong to me. I want them and I want them now. I'm sure you can tell me where to find them after all your morning escapades."

The windows shuddered in the wind. Rain beat against them like hail. The lights flickered and went out.

Paddy nodded to his men. They stripped us of our guns. One put a 9mm to Paul's temple, while the remaining three went to work on me. They were good. They fucked me up. I said nothing. The lights flickered back on as the emergency generators kicked in.

Paddy stood up to say something just as the window exploded. A wayward piece of debris flew into the room. High winds and rain followed. The distraction was all Paul needed. He snatched a Smith & Wesson H.R.T. knife from his shoe, flicked open the blade, and gigged the thug guarding him with one clean motion. As the thug's hands

instinctively went to his slashed throat, Paul's hands caught the gun. The other thugs tackled me hard, one pressing a gun to my head. Paul instantly sized up the situation, blazed away, made it to the door, and escaped. He winged another guy good, rendering one arm useless. Bullets perforated the door swinging closed behind him.

Paddy was furious. "Some friend you have there, huh? Left you to your fate. Well, we don't need him. It's you I want and you I have."

We were all shouting now, our voices drowning in the wind. The lights went out again.

I spit a mouthful of blood onto the carpet. "You don't know Paul, dickhead. None of you will leave here alive."

"Neither will you."

"A pyrrhic victory."

"A what?" The telephone rang. Paddy ignored it initially, but it was insistent. He picked up. "What? No, no. Everything is fine here. Just some wind damage. Thank..."

"Help!" I yelled as loud as I could and caught a gun to the teeth.

"Fuck!" Paddy swore as he slammed the receiver down. "Get him up. Let's get out of here. We've attracted too much attention."

The goons kept me to the front as a shield. Paddy trailed behind. He looked this way and that, then indicated the stairwell. We climbed the stairs to the roof. The whole group was as nervous as hell, looking everywhere for Paul. I struggled in vain. We stepped out into a maelstrom. It felt like the world was coming to an end. The sky was pitch black. Winds howled and screamed. The rain stung. Roofs were being shredded and shit flew down the streets. The thugs worked me over again but got nothing out of me. Paddy was past impatient.

They forced me over to the brick safety wall and stretched my arms out along the top. Paddy nodded to the wounded goon who produced a small hatchet from a sheath on his belt. I could see that he was spoiling for payback. I looked over the wall to the courtyard far below and spied a faint ray of hope.

"You'll talk now, jackass," Paddy snarled. His goons laughed. "Before we are

done with you, you'll sing like a bitch." Paddy kept putting his face near me so we could hear each other. It was an intimate conversation.

"Is this how you killed Jimmy?"

"You know we did. Actually, he was a lot of fun. We chopped him to a stub before he finally called out your name, like some men cry for their mothers, or for God. Are you a god, Tyrone? I think not. Even Jesus died when he was butchered, and he cried out in pain, too."

"Asshole!"

"What did you go to the church for?"

"To make arrangements for his funeral. Why else?"

"Ah! You see? An axe loosens men's tongues. And the funeral home?"

"Same fucking thing."

"You gonna bury your brother with niggers?"

"Well, he was black Irish."

Paddy laughed despite himself. "What the hell are you going to bury?"

"I found his hand."

"A hand? That's all? Christ!"

"He was always very handy."

"A proper burial for a hand?"

"His body got a proper burial."

"What the fuck are you saying?"

"He always wanted to be one with the swamp. Somewhere out there there's an alligator that is part Jimmy, and he's a better gator for it. And Jimmy lives on as a gator. He couldn't be happier."

Paddy laughed, enjoying the black humor.

The door to the stairwell opened with a bang, and Paul fired for deadly effect. The axe man dropped the hatchet and dropped dead. Paddy and the others blasted a fusillade of rounds back, forcing Paul to retreat. The goons made their way to the stairwell to finish the job, while Paddy kept me covered with a small .45, only to find that Paul had vanished like a ghost. My guess was that he had run out of ammo, maybe

gone back to the suite to pick up our guns, if he hadn't already. One thing I knew, he'd keep coming back at every opportunity.

Paddy realized it, too. "Go get that mother fucker!" he yelled.

They determined to finish off this pain in the ass.

Paddy's eyes grew cruel. I knew he was going to shoot me to incapacitate me.

Looking back beyond him, I yelled, "Holy shit!"

He smiled and nodded his head negative. "I ain't falling for that one." The television satellite dish had torn loose, flew through the air like a Frisbee, and knocked him ass over tea kettle. He recovered quickly, snatched up the gun and I knew he was about to shoot me.

I jumped over the wall.

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