

Random Acts of Malice



George R. Hopkins

BOOK I

Life and death are what happen to us while we are making other plans.

—Anonymous

Cindy Waters never expected to meet her death as she rushed home from the 6:30 a.m. Mass at Our Lady Help of Christians to gather her books and papers for her students at intermediate school 7. It was Lent, the season of repentance and prayer in preparation for Easter. During Lent, she forsook her usual run through Bloomingdale Park or Wolfe's Pond to walk to and from church to attend daily Mass. She liked the new priest, who really wasn't that new. The streaks of gray in his hair and the lines etched into his face left one wondering about his age. But he was a handsome tall Jesuit whose devotion and sincerity were infectious. His homilies were short and to the point. They gave her something to think about during the day and to try to practice. After the anguish and mental ordeals she endured for almost two years, he gave her hope and confidence that she had done the right thing.

Turning onto her street, she considered the best ways to bring the priest's message to her eighth-grade students. Then she heard tires screeching and the roar of an engine. She turned in the middle of the street to see a black Ford F-150 XLT barreling toward her. She froze momentarily and then felt the impact of the truck crashing into her and sending her flying thirty feet into the air. Pain soared through her like an electric shock. Her legs, her arms, her back, her head cried out in

burning anguish. Lying on the pavement, she felt blood running down her face.

Cindy heard the car stop and a door open. Where was her pocketbook? She tried to move. Strong arms reached down and pulled her further down the deserted street. What was happening? She sobbed uncontrollably. Then a hand reached down and covered her mouth. She looked up and locked eyes with the driver. That was the last thing she saw as the driver thrust an ice pick deep into her left ear.

The driver calmly walked back to his truck, backed up, and drove forward—stopping abruptly before the body, leaving skid marks. Then the driver backed up again and, this time, sped forward, carefully aligning her head with the tires of the car. The car jerked as if hitting a speed bump when it crushed the twenty-eight-year-old teacher beneath its wheels.

* * * *

“Daddy, do you have to go to court today?” six-year-old Ella asked, clinging to Judge Carlo Abbruzza’s legs. “It’s father-daughter day at school today. Can’t you come? Emily and Madelyn’s fathers are coming.”

Judge Abbruzza looked down at Ella. “I wish I could, Ella-bella, but Daddy’s got work to do.”

Abbruzza’s wife, Marybeth, appeared at the kitchen door flanked by her three sons, John, Michael, and Eugene. “Let Daddy go, Ella. He has to go to work.”

“I don’t want him to go! Why can’t he come to school with me? It’s not fair!”

“Like Dad always says, ‘Life isn’t fair.’ And besides, he’s got to send a lot of people to jail today,” her brother Eugene said.

Ella started crying. Marybeth’s eyes snapped at Gene, and he stepped back.

Abbruzza lifted his little daughter into his arms as their cocker spaniel jumped up on him, nearly knocking him over. “Ella,” he said, “tell your teacher I will make arrangements for

her to take your whole class to the courthouse to show you what we do there.”

“You will, Daddy? You will?”

“Definitely, but I really have to go now, or I’ll be late for court.”

“Be careful, Ella, that he doesn’t lock your whole class up in jail!” Gene warned.

“Back off, Gene. We all had that class trip, and it was fun. You’ll love it, Ella,” Michael said.

“I’m telling you, Ella, they are going to lock you and your teacher up!”

“Don’t believe him, Ella,” John said. “He’s just jealous!”

“Jealous? My ass, jealous!”

“That’s it, young man,” Marybeth said. “You keep this up, and I’m going to wash your mouth out with soap. I don’t care how big you are!”

Carlo Abbruzza stopped at the door. “I’ll be back tonight. I want to hear about how all of you did in school today. Make sure your homework is done, and help Mom with the chores. Love you all. Remember, there is nothing we can’t accomplish if we work together. Now get ready for school, and no more bickering!”

* * * *

Detective Tom Cavanaugh rubbed his eyes as he drove to the 123 Precinct. It had been another sleepless night. Why did little Stephen Michael cry so much? He seemed to have a seventh sense that as soon as Cavanaugh got him to sleep and put him down in his crib, he waited until Cavanaugh’s head hit the pillow before starting to wail again. It wasn’t fair. Fran could sleep through a Baghdad bombing or a nuclear attack. How could she sleep when the baby was crying? She insisted he didn’t have to pick little Stephen up every time he cried, but Cavanaugh didn’t see it that way.

He yawned at a red light on Hylan Boulevard and thought how easy it was for him to watch a junkie or an alcoholic go through withdrawal. He had no sympathy for them. He could sit back and watch them sweat, gasp for air, shake, throw up, and even defecate in their pants. He would fire questions at them in the midst of their seizures and hallucinations. But hearing his little son start to cry was another thing.

The doctors said little Stephen had colic. A lot of babies have colic. They said as many as 25 percent of infants have some kind of colic, and it isn't symptomatic of any disease or illness. Eventually, they told him, Stephen would grow out it. But they didn't hear Stephen crying in the night.

In the precinct parking lot, he slammed the car door and spilled his coffee. "Shit!" he muttered. "I don't care if I do spoil him! I'm going to hold him each night until he goes to sleep!"

"Is there something we should know?" a voice behind him asked.

Cavanaugh turned to see his old friend Patrolman Michael Shanley smiling. "Who are you going to hold each night until he goes to sleep? I hope, for your sake, he's gentle and has a lot of money"

"Shut up, Shanley," he said. "It's been another rough night. The little guy won't go to sleep unless I hold him"

Walking up the precinct stairs together, Shanley warned, "You're going to spoil him, Tom, if you keep doing that. Let him cry. He'll get tired and fall asleep."

"He's so tiny, Shanley. We almost lost him when he was born. He cries so much he is covered in mucus. I'm afraid he'll die. That he won't be able to catch his breath. That he'll get sudden infant death syndrome" That . . . that . . . Oh shit! I'm just too old to be a father!"

Shanley poured a cup of coffee from the lobby machine and gave it to Cavanaugh. "What does Fran say?" he asked.

“She says what you said and what the doctors said — I’m going to spoil him if I keep picking him up and rocking him to sleep.”

“Did you ever think they might be right?”

Cavanaugh scratched his chin. He had forgotten to shave. “Shit!” he mumbled again. He looked up at the desk sergeant and asked, “Anything going last night?”

“Usual couple of drunks, one domestic abuse call, a couple of teenagers in a car crash on Arthur Kill, and a hit-and-run we just got a call about a few minutes ago”

Cavanaugh stared up at the desk sergeant. His name was Paul Mason. In the short time Cavanaugh had been in the precinct, he never recalled Sergeant Mason not having something to eat in his hand. This morning, he was munching on a bacon-wrapped meat loaf hero with pepper, cheese, and onion. It was hard to see how he could fit the sandwich into his mouth, let alone eat it at eight in the morning. Mason looked to weigh well over three hundred pounds, and Cavanaugh wondered how many uniforms he had grown out of.

“Are you married, Mason?” Cavanaugh asked.

Mason took another bite out of his sandwich and a piece of onion slithered down his blue uniform. “Yeah. What’s it to you?”

“I was just wondering. Do you have any kids?”

“Yeah. I got six kids.”

Cavanaugh’s mind conjured up a picture. It wasn’t a pretty picture. “Any of them have colic?”

“They all did,” Mason replied.

Cavanaugh looked up at him. Six kids with colic. He shook his head. “How did you deal with that?”

“Simple, Cavanaugh. I went to work.”

* * * *

As Fr. Jack Bennis removed his violet chasuble in the sacristy after Mass, his mind was jumping like an Ivory ball on a roulette table, planning his activities for the day. He had

been up since 4:00 a.m., reading his daily prayers and doing his daily exercises. His plans for the day included visiting the kindergarten and first-grade classes in Our Lady Help of Christians, visiting some of the sick in the parish and in the hospital, and then dropping by the Von Doussa Nursing Home to see his aunt. If there was time, he hoped to be able to visit his sister-in-law and give her a hand with his only nephew.

He had been temporarily assigned to Our Lady Help of Christians by the archdiocese. "Temporarily" had turned into three months and counting. During his time here, he had grown to be accepted by most people, except his pastor, Angelo Rosito, who could have been a poster child for Grumpy from the Seven Dwarfs. If Father Bennis would greet him at breakfast with a cordial "Good morning, Monsignor," the diminutive Rosito's response might be, "What's good about it?" or "What makes you think you're an expert?"

As he folded the long white linen alb, Frank Laurie, the sacristan, a man in his sixties with a congenital frown, hunched shoulders, a dancing eye, and the movements of a mouse on steroids, barged in and said, "There's a call for you, Father Bennis."

Bennis checked his watch. "Who is it, Mr. Laurie?"

Laurie grabbed the vestments from the priest's hands and started to put them away. He spoke rapidly in tune with his movements. "There's been an accident. A woman was run down. They want a priest."

"Where is she?"

"Barnard Avenue, off Craig."

Bennis looked around. "Where do they keep the oils for anointing the sick?"

"No need," Laurie said. "She's dead."

Bennis stared at Laurie's sloping back as the sacristan meticulously and rapidly folded and put away the vestments. "Where does the pastor keep the oils?" he repeated.

“Third cabinet on the left, but I’m telling you, you won’t need them. She’s dead as a doornail.”

“Thank you, Mr. Laurie,” Bennis said, removing a small black leather case from the cabinet. “I appreciate your concern.”

As he rushed out the door, Bennis recalled his mother saying how life and death are what happen to us when we are busy making other plans.

* * * *

As Cavanaugh walked up the wooden stairs to the detectives’ office at the 123, his right knee cracked on every other step. But he wasn’t listening to his knees. He was listening to the memory of his three-month-old son crying through the night. He hoped Stephen Michael had stopped crying by now.

Opening the door, he suddenly became aware of a strange sound — silence. The only noise echoed from a tone-deaf drunk down the hall in a holding cell warbling, “Have some madeira, m’ dear. It’s really much nicer than beer”

He looked around the office. There was no one there. *Where the hell were they?* he thought. There was no Sebastian reading the sports pages of the newspaper and no Newhouser munching on his usual tuna sub.

The *New York Post*’s daily racing schedule covered Sebastian’s desk. A crumpled wrapping and a half-eaten tuna Subway hero that looked more like eviscerated cat bore mute witness to Newhouser’s sudden departure. But where the hell was everyone?

The fluorescent lights above flickered. On the far wall a five-by-four map of Staten Island hung with the confines of the Tottenville Precinct delineated by red magic marker. Various yellowed unread notices and procedures dotted the walls.

His first thought was they were abducted by aliens. But then he figured even aliens would have a hard time finding Tottenville.

Had he forgotten a meeting? He checked his desk calendar. No meeting, no message, just pictures of his wife and newborn baby.

The door behind him abruptly opened, and a head appeared. "Hold the fort, Cavanaugh," Lieutenant Parker said.

"Where is everyone?" Cavanaugh asked.

"There's been a hit-and-run a few blocks away. CIU is investigating. Sebastian and Newhouser are there. I'm headed over there now myself."

"Wait a second and I'll go with you," Cavanaugh said.

"No. Somebody's got to stay here. As you know we're short on staff, thanks to Mayor Tightwad's cutbacks. Pretty soon, he'll want us supplying our own toilet paper. If there wasn't a fatality, I wouldn't go myself."

"What happened?"

"Looks like a typical hit-and-run. Probably some teenager in his father's car rushing home from a party. But there are some irregularities, and we have to check it out."

"Maybe I can help, sir," Cavanaugh offered.

The lieutenant opened the door a little wider and stared at him. "No offense, Cavanaugh, but wherever you go you seem to generate more problems than we need. Stay here and stay out of trouble. That's an order."

Cavanaugh shrugged. "Yes, sir," he muttered and sat down, tossing a book he had taken from his car on his desk. When the lieutenant closed the door, Cavanaugh waited an appropriate fifteen seconds and then called his wife.

"Fran," he began, "how's the baby?"

"Thanks, Tom," she began. "I guess the honeymoon is over. No, 'How are you feeling, Fran?' Now it's, 'How's the baby?' What am I? Chopped liver?"

"Aw, Fran, you know I love you, and I don't like chopped liver!" He hesitated a moment and then added, "But seriously, how is Stephen? Has he stopped crying? Do you think we need to take him to the doctor?"

“He’s fine. In fact, he’s sleeping now.”

“How come he didn’t sleep last night? I had to walk him all night.”

“Relax, Tom. He’ll be fine. I plan to take him over to see my mother in Brooklyn later today. She hasn’t seen him yet.”

“Why doesn’t she make the trip over the bridge to see us? You shouldn’t be taking Stephen out. It looks like it might rain later. Ask her to come here if she wants to see him”

“I’m a little worried about her, to be honest, Tom. My sister, Susan, called and said Mom has been acting a little strange lately.”

“Even more reason why you shouldn’t go to see her. She might have some virus or something.”

“Will you relax, Tom? We’ll be fine. I just want her to see Stephen and let her hold her grandson.”

“No, Fran. Don’t let her hold him! She’ll probably give him some disease. Keep him away from her!”

“I’m going, Tom. My sister will be there to help. If you need me, give me a call. We’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

“Sometimes I think you’re more inflexible than congress. Remember what Emerson said? ‘A foolish stubbornness is the hobgoblin of petty minds.’”

“Emerson never said that, Thomas Cavanaugh. And you shouldn’t be the one talking about being stubborn!”

“Okay! I give up. I hope you’re right. But just be careful. We had a hit-and-run around here this morning, and there might be some drunk driving around.”

“I’ll be careful. Don’t worry.” She added, “You better take care of yourself!”

“No sweat, Fran. I’m stuck here in the office, while everyone else is out in the street doing real police work. What could possibly happen in the Tottenville Precinct? Nobody even knows where we are!”

* * * *

Father Bennis arrived at the hit-and-run scene as the girl's body was about to be removed. The sacristan, Frank Laurie, was right. There was no question about it. The young woman was dead. Her face was unrecognizable and looked more like a smashed Halloween pumpkin with auburn hair. Sebastian and Newhouser allowed him to give a last blessing to the corpse before it was removed.

It was impossible to identify any facial features on the girl, but yet there was something familiar with the girl's clothing. Her running shoe and her matching pink and white running jacket told Bennis she was athletic, in good shape, and had an eye for dressing well. He thought for a moment he might have seen her at church that morning.

"What happened?" he asked Sebastian.

"She got run over."

"Who did this?"

"We don't know," Newhouser answered. "We are going to try to track down the car from tire marks, glass fragments, and possible paint chippings. We'll know more after the lab gets through."

"What's her name?" the priest asked.

A few reporters pushed against the police barriers asking questions of the police and the bystanders. "You know we can't tell you that, Father," Sebastian said, elbowing Newhouser aside.

"Come on, guys. My brother works with you. You can trust me. I thought I might be able to help her family with grief counseling."

"You can do all the grief counseling you want after we finish here and notify her family," Sebastian stated. "Now please, Father, step back and let us do our job."

Bennis moved back and stood behind the police barriers among the bystanders.

"What's her name, Father?" a reporter suddenly asked him.

"I don't know," Bennis answered.

A little woman who looked to be in her eighties, with white hair in a bun, a wrinkled white apron with red roses, and a wooden rolling pin covered with flour, interjected, "Her name is Cindy Waters. She's a teacher. She lives down the block."

The reporter pushed in front of Bennis. "What kind of person was she?"

"She was quiet," the woman said. "She seemed dedicated. A good neighbor. Not like that old drunk across the street."

The reporter wrote quickly in his notepad. "What can you tell us about her? Was she married?"

The woman looked up at the man and said in a shaky voice, "Like I said, she was a good neighbor. Never caused any trouble. A good citizen too. She served on the community council and on a jury some time ago and never breathed a word of what was going on. I think she had a dog. A little thing. It think it was one of those frankfurter dogs."

"A dachshund?"

"I don't know much about dogs, but she walked it every day and cleaned up after it too. Not like some of the slobs in the neighborhood. There's a man down the street, Mr. Gaffney, who's got this ugly bulldog that looks like Winston Churchill. His dog barks at anyone who walks past his house and poops all over my lawn. Someday I'm going to scrape the poop up and put it on his doorstep. To be honest, I don't really like dogs. I have two cats, a calico and a tabby"

Father Bennis moved away and looked around. He had the feeling someone was watching him. Behind three women down the block, he saw a tall man with a gray crew cut in an olive-drab army field jacket staring at him. They locked eyes for a moment, and then the man turned and disappeared behind some overgrown privet hedges. There was something about the way the man looked at Bennis that bothered him. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he thought he recognized him from a long time ago, and he didn't have a good feeling about it.