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SAMPLE

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Volume 1 of the *Flint Files* series

## Chapter One

Millie Boatwright's tea was getting cold. She wanted to make a new cup, but the Tabby in her lap was so peaceful and quiet, Millie couldn't imagine disturbing him. Atonic usually disdained human contact, but today was cuddled on her wool throw. Maybe there'd be a break in the cold snap and she could sit with him on her balcony. She'd enjoy that.

The doorbell cut short her reverie. So few people came to visit her these days. She wondered if it might be someone from the church. Father Stewart had been encouraging members of the congregation to visit with the older worshippers. Millie had been lonesome for a long time. Never married, her life had revolved around her friends and the church. Her friends as well as her fellow parishioners had been dying off at a disturbing rate. At 78, Millie wasn't old, but she was the oldest one left in her prayer group.

She let the visitor in, planting a kiss on a cold cheek. The visitor wore a heavy coat and gloves against the bitter January cold. It rarely snowed in New Orleans, but some winters it got cold enough to force people into layering up. She asked if she could take the coat and gloves.

Millie wondered why the pain in her chest was so severe. And she couldn't breathe. The visitor clasped her tight, and as Millie breathed her last the visitor laid her softly on the floor. The knife was withdrawn, and a photo of the church was placed carefully on her chest. Using the blood dripping from the blade, the visitor drew a red X on the photo. Two more to go today.

## Chapter Two

“Old people are supposed to die, just not like this.” Detective Danny Flint gestured at the old woman’s body lying on the floor. “She and two other old people in the same apartment building killed the same day” Danny had surveyed each scene, then left another detective in charge. Each victim wore a photo of Martyrs Episcopal Church, a crude X drawn over the image in the victim’s blood. One of them wasn’t even a member of the church.

“Cause of death is probably exsanguination,” the medical examiner noted. “We’ll post tomorrow morning I expect. Any ideas, Danny?”

“No new ones.” The fifty-two year old detective had never seen this kind of butchery directed at the elderly. These three brought the total to nine in the past two months. And nobody had a solid lead.

Danny did some thinking out loud. “Obviously it has to be about the church. It’s losing members and there have been protests when the priest conducted gay weddings. Religious nut?”

Corporal Carly Thiebedeaux, the scene commander, spoke up. “That makes no sense. If somebody’s upset about gay weddings, why not go after the priest?”

Danny shook his head. “If it made sense we’d have already caught the guy.” He thought for a few more minutes before speaking again. “Father Swain tried to get the Episcopal Church to put more effort into negotiating with the Anglican Communion about the issues separating them. And, the denomination has turned to a lot of political activism in the past decade or so. Could this be not religious nuts but political activists?”

Carly raised the same objection. “If it was political activists it would probably make sense. They tend to make slightly saner decisions than the religious fringe, and they’d be going after the priest instead of the older members.”

Danny wished she wasn’t quite so perceptive. He was running out of ideas quickly. “Church membership has been dropping for years while the value of the land was soaring. Money beats most things as a motive.”

Carly nodded agreement. The church was a familiar landmark in New Orleans. When it had been built the land was cheap. “I think I read that a developer offered something

like two hundred fifty million for the land, but the diocese refused to sell. If that's what a developer is offering it's probably worth more. Yeah, money makes some sense."

In the past couple of months there were nine dead, seven of them members of a single church. The two who weren't members were friends or associates of other victims, and Danny was still trying to construct a victim profile that didn't focus on the church itself. The church photo X'ed out in the victim's blood certainly pointed to the church as the commonality.

"Corporal, what's the status on canvassing the building?" Danny was addressing the scene commander, a fancy term for the most senior patrol division officer on site. Danny was really in charge of the scene, but he was one person. The patrol division was many hundreds.

Off-duty it was Danny and Carly. On-duty it was Detective and Corporal. As it should be. Both were professionals. "Nobody saw anything all day." Carly stopped to review her notes. "A delivery truck from Sears brought in a new dryer for Apartment Seven, but they've been cleared. Otherwise, the place has no video surveillance, the doors have no peep-holes, and most of the residents are elderly shut-ins. Nobody ever sees anything."

"Have the animal control people been called yet?" There were three cats in the apartment. Danny hated cats. One of them, the Tabby, had blood on its whiskers. They were evidence in the criminal investigation. Fortunately, neither of the other two victims had any pets.

"Yeah, they're coming." Carly was not pleased. "The vic's niece is supposed to come by a little later. She wants to take the cats home with her. Says they'll die if they're not taken care of properly. Well, they're evidence, and a few more dead cats are not going to ruin my parade."

Danny nodded agreement. When he had called the niece, the woman seemed more concerned about the animals than about her dead aunt. Stupid fucking names – Atonic, Astrophe and Aclysmic. There's no accounting for some people's taste in pet names.

Danny drove the short distance to the church. The building was classic nineteenth century stone and marble. Someone had once told Danny that Episcopalians were sort of Catholic Lite, just with more money. The money showed here. The nearly-empty parking lot was a couple of acres, and the cemetery another acre plus. Prime location, so maybe it wasn't so far-fetched that somebody would murder to get the property. People had been killed for a lot less.

Father Stewart Swain was in a meeting with some of the church leaders. There was urgent business. John Sherman, one of the recently deceased, had been on the Board of Aldermen. A replacement was needed but, more importantly, a way to stop the carnage was required immediately.

Father Stewart closed the meeting with a prayer, then invited Danny in with an offer of coffee. "The photos are nothing but a cruel joke. Somebody's taunting us. What the fuck are we going to do, Detective?"

## Chapter Three

Something the priest had said created a tickle in the back of Detective Flint's mind. He couldn't find the source, so he dismissed it.

Danny had no more idea what to do than the priest. He commiserated yet once more with the cleric about the brutal murders of his parishioners. Lieutenant Daryl Gryzgorczyk, commander of High Profile Crimes, had put every available detective on the case. Danny, the relatively new second in command, was relieved of all other duties so he could concentrate on the murders.

Sarah Goldberg and Nathan Silverstein were the best analysts on the squad. In true police fashion, they were referred to as the Jihadists. Nathan was practicing, Sarah was not. Sarah was married, Nathan was not. Both had proven themselves on the street, although Goldberg was the better of the two. Danny called them to see if there was anything new.

"Goldberg." Sarah was always dead serious on the phone. When Silverstein answered, it was usually some smart-ass greeting such as "Waterboarding Central. You bag 'em, we nag 'em." Fortunately, Goldberg usually answered the phone.

She knew nothing more. "Danny, we've gone over everything we can find. Most of the nine victims attended the same elementary school, Martyrs Academy. Again, it points at the church. Eight of the nine were members of the ACLU. Well, half the ACLU board of directors belongs to the church or one of the other Episcopal parishes in town.

"We've found something, but not sure what it means. Of the six dead before today, five had been in the same grade at Martyrs Academy. We expanded the list one grade in each direction, then tracked everybody. I mean everybody, every single kid who had finished elementary school there in 1953, 1954 and 1955. It's spooky. They've been dropping like flies for just over ten years now. And one of today's victims is in that group.

"In 1955 there were eighty-six kids. An actuary told us that, statistically, sixty years later, there should be fifty-nine still alive. There are forty-one. The excess deaths started about ten years ago. It's hard to separate the ones that statistically should have died from the ones who shouldn't. The Chief has approved hiring a statistician to sort this out."

“Where are we on the number-cruncher?” Danny was grasping at straws here. Hopefully somebody could put a label on what was happening, confirm why, and start building a profile of the killer. Or killers. Or whatever.

“Human Resources in its infinite wisdom lumps statisticians in with bookkeepers. I mean, both work with numbers, right?” Goldberg was not a fan of HR. “We’ve been authorized to pay \$12.83 an hour for a statistician. Silverstein interviewed one this morning. When Nathan mentioned ‘standard deviation,’ the guy said he wasn’t willing to work with porn.”

“Call Mike Allison.” Danny gave her the management consultant’s number. Flint and Allison had met during the kidnapping investigation that put Flint’s career on a fast track. Danny called on him from time to time less for his skills than for his objectivity.

Danny turned back to Father Stewart. “Have you reconsidered protection for the older church members?” Danny wanted to assign armed patrol officers to random checks on the older church-goers. The priest had been agnostic about it, the Aldermen opposed it and the individual members were waiting for the parish hierarchy to tell them what to do.

“The Aldermen believe it’s a surrender to fear, and I’m not sure I disagree. You’re free to offer it to the members themselves, but I don’t know how much good it’s going to do if they’re not cooperative.” The priest looked sadly at Danny, who had no words of advice or comfort to offer.

He left the priest to his solitary sorrow and returned to the squad’s office. “Daryl, what are we missing? I mean, it’s obviously the church, but we can’t pin down a motive. Forcing the Diocese to sell the land and building makes the most sense, but if you’re going to take the time to kill a bunch of individual old people one at a time, why not just burn down the fucking building? That’d get them off the land.”

Grzgorczyk called in Silverstein. The thirty-odd year old officer wore his uniform of a rumpled gray suit and a gray tie. He insisted that he owned a dozen suits, all different colors such as Spanish Gray, Gainsboro, Silver, Gun Metal, and so forth. It was all gray to Flint.

Silverstein had his hand extended in greeting. “Hi, I’m running for Jew of the Day. Can I count on you for your support?” Danny groaned. Every week Silverstein had some new joke. One day a month ago the squad came in to find every pencil eraser in the squad room neatly cut off. On the board was a sign: *The Mohel Strikes Again!*

“Silverstein, get your mind in the game here. What besides the church can possibly be the connection? Supermarket, car wash, hair stylist, newspaper boy, astrologist, anything.” Grzgorczyk was as frustrated as the rest of them.

“We’re looking at service providers now. We’ve done the obvious – maid service, plumbers, window washers, that kind of thing. We’re starting on things like attorneys and financial advisors. I’m not sure the attorney thing is going to work out because most of the victims used Fitch and Clemons. Fitch was an Alderman at the church before his death, and Clemons sings bass in the church choir. Of course the church members use them as their attorneys.” When talking business Silverstein could actually keep the broad humor at bay.

“We’re seeking a court order for every member’s financial records, but the lawyers and the banks objected. They’ve demanded to know what we expect to find out by combing through their bank accounts. And, frankly, we’re not sure what we’re going to find out. It doesn’t help that the judge was on the ACLU board before joining the bench. He’s buddies with a whole lot of people at the church.”

“Travel, spending habits, internet porn, anything?” Grzgorczyk was grasping at hallucinated straws now.

“They’re given to going on cruises, even after two of their group fell overboard into the Gulf about seven years ago. The next year one disappeared in Cozumel, then a few years later one disappeared while on a shore excursion in Cartagena. Last year one committed suicide during a port visit to Cozumel. Different ships and different cruise lines, we’re getting nowhere fast with that.” Silverstein went into his head for a minute. Flint and Grzgorczyk let him think.

“You know, maybe nine were murdered between ten years ago and this year when the mass stabbings began. That still leaves a whole lot of deaths that I don’t think should have occurred. I’ll pull the death certificates and see if anything pops out.” That was the first really new idea anyone had come up with in a couple of weeks. The squad leaders knew not to get excited about it, but they couldn’t help feeling a tiny twinge of hope.

On his way out the door Silverstein threw over his shoulder, “Internet porn? At that age? You’re kidding, right?”

Danny’s phone rang. It was Cheryl, his special lady friend. There was some benefit tonight for St. Swithin’s, the hospital where she was a chief trauma nurse. Danny wore



coat and tie ten hours a day on the job. After work it was shorts and a T-shirt, or less. When he'd made Sergeant a few years ago he broke down and bought a tux. It was not quite fashionable anymore, but it still fit. Sort of. It was probably time for another visit to the tailor to see if any more seams could be let out.

Grzgorczyk interrupted Danny's musings. "OK if I send Goldberg to the autopsies?" Daryl was careful not to step on Danny's toes. His deputy wasn't particularly turf-conscious, but Daryl wanted to make sure Danny knew he wasn't micromanaging.

"Great idea, boss. Dr. Marsten loves her and so do most of the other MEs. Some of the new ones get a little skittish around her you know, but she's like athlete's foot. Grows on you." Danny saluted the boss and walked out to his car.

Grzgorczyk called Goldberg. "Can you handle autopsy duty tomorrow morning? Danny's running his legs down to nubs. Pretty soon his balls will be dragging on the ground."

The detective and former EMT was glad to oblige. The pathologists were happy not to have to explain all the technical terms to detectives whose medical knowledge rarely extended beyond knowing that Band Aid wasn't a musical group. And Sarah Goldberg had become an expert at the two most important roles a detective plays at an autopsy: Staying out of the way and not asking stupid questions.

## Chapter Four

Daryl had called Danny into his office, along with Melvin Brown. Melvin was nearing retirement, which was a shame. He had mentored or trained almost half of the squad's detectives. NOPD actively recruited in the African American community, and even offered paid scholarships for two-year criminal justice degrees to minorities. Blacks were still under-represented on the force, particularly among detectives. Losing a respected and experienced detective was hard. Losing one who was black was even harder.

Melvin was there not just because he was involved in the investigation. He had handled three of the nine stabbings and was the first to raise the serial killer possibility. One or two stabbings with a church photo left behind might be a nut case. Three became serial murder. Melvin had called it on murder two, Forest Oxley.

Danny and Melvin had no doubt why they had been called in. Lieutenant Daryl Grzgorczyk hated dealing with the intrusive relatives. His policy for the squad was to contact the deceased's relatives at least once a week for a minimum of one year while the case was still active. Yes, there are no inactive murder investigations. No, that's not entirely true either.

After a year to three years some investigations were moved to Cold Case status. If the squad's detectives had maintained at least weekly contact, then the relatives had a much easier time accepting the move.

It was the busybodies who were the worst. Melvin excelled at dealing with busybodies. Such as the young fellow sitting across from Lieutenant Grzgorczyk.

"What are the police doing to protect my Aunt Carol? It doesn't look like much to me."

Danny knew who Carol Talbot was. She was a frequent contributor to charities in the New Orleans area. The amounts of her attributed donations were impressive. It was rumored that her anonymous donations dwarfed those attributed directly to her.

"Mr. Vandever, we're very sympathetic." Danny hoped to defuse things quickly, with little luck. He knew Joel Vanderver's tragic story, left orphaned by a home invasion when he was fourteen.

“Just like the police were sympathetic when my parents were murdered.” Joel glared at Danny. “No progress on that and no progress on protecting my aunt. Can’t you people do your jobs?”

Danny knew the story. Vanderveer was Carol Talbot’s nephew and adopted son. Joel’s parents had died in a still-unsolved home invasion when he was fourteen. Fortunately, the boy had survived because he was spending the night camping with a friend. His Aunt Carol had taken him in and adopted her brother’s son.

Melvin tried. “Mr. Vanderveer, the murder of your parents is unsolved, but the case remains open. In this case we’re acutely aware of the issues. Your aunt and another three hundred people may well be in mortal danger. Detective Flint has been assigned to the case full time and has first call on every resource in the squad, not to mention the entire department.”

“Well, I don’t think you’re doing enough. I’ve studied criminal investigation in law school, and you people remind me of the Keystone Cops.” Joel was in his final year of law school and worked part-time at Fitch and Clemons, the small law firm where his Aunt Carol was a lucrative client. He had been promised an associate’s job as soon as he graduated and passed the bar exam.

“Mr. Vanderveer, we applaud how devoted you are to your aunt. You live on the guest house on her property. We feel the same kind of urgency you do about this.” Danny was close to the end of his rope.

Vanderveer turned to the Lieutenant. “So, you’ve got a thin old black man and a fat old white man with their thumbs up their asses on this thing. I demand some action.”

Grzgorczyk didn’t rise to the bait. “What would you have us do?”

“Find the fucking killer. That’s obvious. The fact that you haven’t is just proof of your incompetence. I could probably find the killer quicker than you hacks.” Joel Vanderveer would probably make a fine politician someday.

Brown was patient. “You’re a law student, right? And you’re working as an intern at Fitch and Clemons?” The squad had details on all members of the church who might be at risk, including Joel’s aunt/adoptive mother. And, Fitch and Clemons was a shared connection amongst most of the victims.

“Yeah, so what?” Vanderveer was going to be a successful attorney eventually. Good, maybe not. Successful, almost certainly.

“Son, these things take time and you know that. We’re dealing with an exceptionally smart killer. And a lucky one. Lucky may be more important than smart. The first of these murders occurred two months ago. The victims are soft targets who lived alone. Fairly easy to kill, unlikely anybody is going to see anything. That’s not an excuse, it’s simply a description of reality.”

“Don’t call me son, you old coo ... coot.” Vanderveer had the upper hand and knew it. “I’ll bet I know as much as you useless dickwads and could catch the killer in a week without raising a sweat.”

“OK.” Brown had given this speech before. “I won’t call you son. I’ll call you spoiled brat because that’s how you’re acting. Spoiled brat, you have the right to remain silent. I strongly suggest you avail yourself of that right before your mouth gets you in any more trouble.”

“I’m not in any fucking trouble. You’re in trouble, you incompetent old fool, because you haven’t caught the killer yet.” Joel’s voice was rising, which was exactly what Brown had hoped for.

“You obviously know how to catch the killer, spoiled brat, but you’re not telling us. That’s interfering in a police investigation. Now, turn around and put your hands behind your back. You’re under arrest.” Brown’s handcuffs were already out. Joel was rooted to the floor, staring at the detective in disbelief. So, Brown spun him around, cuffed him and finished reciting his Miranda rights.

“My lawyer’s going to have your job!” Joel was finally shouting. “I demand to talk to Steve Clemons right now. He knows the Mayor, and every one of you is fucked. And take off these goddamned handcuffs. Now.”

Daryl Grzgorczyk picked up where Brown had left off. “Shut up or we’ll add resisting arrest and creating a public disturbance. And, as I’m sure you know, there are another half dozen charges we can bring.

“Spoiled brat, our objective is to protect your aunt and the rest of the people at risk, and while we’re at it, to solve nine murders. Right now yours is to fluff up your ego. We’re far more likely to succeed at our objective than you are to succeed at yours. Danny?”

Danny had already dialed Fitch and Clemons. “Hi, this is Detective Danny Flint of High Profile Crimes. We’ve just arrested one of your interns for interfering in a police murder investigation and may add resisting arrest charges, along with creating a public disturbance. He wants to talk to a lawyer. Yeah, I’ll hold.”

Vanderveer was chafing at the cuffs. Brown just smiled at him. Grzgorczyk went back to work, ignoring the drama playing out in his office.

“Why, what a pleasant surprise counselor. I thought your license to practice law was suspended.” Myra Hartag was on the phone. She had used warrantless technical surveillance to try and identify a reporter’s confidential sources during an investigation Danny had headed the year before. He had been instrumental in Hartag losing her job at the prosecutor’s office.

“Look, Flint, it was a three month suspension and I’m back. I’ll have your badge for this.” Hartag was always so pleasant to deal with. So, Dany dealt with her.

“Mr. Vanderveer claims he knows how to find a killer the police are seeking but refuses to divulge his information. He is also screaming at police officers and creating a disturbance in a city government office. By the way, we have it all on video.

“As you know, first we need to book Mr. Vanderveer. And strip search him, of course. A cavity search will be part of that. Unfortunately, the only holding cell we’ve got available is currently occupied by a guy pulled in for exposing himself in public.” Danny waited a moment.

“Yes, I’ll put Mr. Vanderveer on the phone.” A very nervous Joel Vanderveer took the receiver.

The police officers could only hear Vanderveer’s side of the conversation, of course, but it was enough. All Joel said was “But...” about five times before saying “OK.” Then he hung up.

“Officers, I do not know who or where the killer is nor do I know how to catch him. I apologize for my rudeness. You see, my Aunt Carol raised me after my own parents died and she’s all I have left. I hope you can understand my concern for her safety.” He looked as though he didn’t believe a word he had said, but that wasn’t important. Video surveillance had caught the whole thing.

Brown uncuffed him and asked if he needed a lift. No, he didn’t; he needed a stiff drink.

After Joel left Danny spoke to Lieutenant Grzgorczyk. "Hartag has ethics problems and was hired by Fitch and Clemons. The law firm is a common link among the victims. Perhaps Fitch and Clemons deserve a closer look."

"Yeah, I'll put Silverstein on that. He hates lawyers." Grzgorczyk called Silverstein into his office and closed the door.

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