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RICHARD CASTLE

**STORM
FRONT**

A Derrick Storm Thriller

HYPERION

NEW YORK

FOR MY FATHER

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN: 978-1-4013-2490-2

FIRST EDITION

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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CHAPTER 3

BACAU, Romania

It's the eyes that get you. Derrick Storm knew this from experience.

You can tell yourself they're just normal kids. You can tell yourself everything is going to work out fine for them. You can tell yourself that maybe they haven't had it too bad.

But the eyes. Oh, the eyes. Big, dark, shiny. Full of hope and hurt. What stories they tell. What entreaties they make: Please, help me; please, take me home; please, please, give me a hug, just one little hug, and I'll be yours forever.

Yeah, they get you. Every time. The eyes were why Storm kept returning to the Orphanage of the Holy Name, this small place of love and unexpected beauty in an otherwise drab, industrial city in northeast Romania. Once you looked into eyes like that, you had to keep coming back.

And so, having finished the job in Venice, Storm was making another one of his visits there. The Orphanage of the Holy Name was housed in an ancient abbey that had been spared bombing in World War II and was converted to its current purpose shortly thereafter. Storm had slipped inside its main wall, grabbed a rake, and was quietly gathering leaves from the courtyard when he saw a set of big, brown eyes staring curiously at him.

He turned to see a little girl, no more than five, clutching a

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tattered rag that may once have been a teddy bear, many years and many children ago. She was wearing clothing that was just this side of threadbare. She had brown hair and a serious face that was just a little too sad for any child that age.

“Hello, my name is Derrick,” he said in easy, flowing Romanian. “What’s your name?”

“Katya,” she replied. “Katya Beckescu.”

“I’m pleased to meet you.”

“I’m here because my mommy is dead,” Katya said, in the matter-of-fact manner in which children share all news, good or bad.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Storm replied. “Do you like it here?”

“It’s nice,” Katya said. “But sometimes I wish I had a real home.”

“We’ll have to see if we can do something about that,” Storm said, but he was interrupted.

A woman dressed in a nun’s habit, no more than four-foot-eleven and mostly gristle, approached with a stern face. “Off with you now, Katya,” she said in Romanian. “You still haven’t finished your chores, child.”

She directed her next set of orders at Storm.

“I’m sorry, little boy, but we’re not taking any more residents at the moment,” she said, switching to English that she spoke in a rich, Dublin brogue. “You’ll just have to run along now.”

“Hello, Sister Rose,” Storm said, dropping his rake and enveloping the nun in an embrace.

Sister Rose McAvoy smiled as she allowed herself to be semi-crushed against Storm’s brick wall of a chest. She was pushing eighty, looked like she was sixty, moved like she was forty, and maintained the irrepressible spirit of the teenage girl she had been when she was first assigned to the orphanage many decades before, as a young novitiate. She always said she was Irish by birth, Romanian by necessity, and Catholic by the grace of God.

During her time at Holy Name, she had intrepidly guided the orphanage through the Soviet occupation and Ceaușescu, through

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the eighties' austerity and the 1989 revolution, through the National Salvation Front and every government that followed, and lately, through the International Monetary Fund.

Improbably, she had kept the authorities appeased and the orphanage alive at every stage. If ever asked how she had done it, she would wink and say, "God listens to our prayers, you know."

Storm wasn't sure what to think about the force of His almighty hand, but he suspected the orphanage's success had a lot more to do with Sister Rose's abilities as an administrator, fundraiser, taskmaster, and loving mother figure to generations.

It certainly wasn't because she had it easy. Sister Rose made it a point to take in the worst of the worst, the kids other orphanages wouldn't touch, the ones who had almost no hope of being adopted. Many had been damaged by neglect in other orphanages. Many were handicapped, either mentally or physically. Some ended up staying well beyond the time at which they were supposed to age out, their eighteenth birthday, simply because they had nowhere else to go and Sister Rose never turned anyone out in the cold. They were all God's children, so they all had a place at her table.

Storm had come across the orphanage years earlier, doing a job the gruesome details of which he made every effort to forget. Whenever he visited, he came with a suitcase or two full of large-denomination bills for Sister Rose.

Now they strolled, arm in arm, through the garden that Sister Rose had tended to as lovingly as she did her many children. Storm felt incredible peace here. The world made sense here. There was no ambiguity, no deceit, no need to parse motives and question whys and wherefores. There was just Sister Rose and her incredible goodness. And all those children with their eyes.

"Sister Rose," Storm said with a wistful sigh, "when are you going to marry me?"

She patted his arm. "I keep telling you, laddy, I'm already hitched to Jesus Christ," she said, then added with a wink: "But if he ever breaks it off with me, you'll be my first call."

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"I eagerly await the day," he said. Storm had proposed to her no less than twenty times through the years.

"Thank you for your donation," she said, quietly. "You're a gift from God, Derrick Storm. I don't know what we'd do without you."

"It's the least I can do, especially for children like that," he said, gesturing toward the little girl, who was now chasing a butterfly across the yard.

"Oh, that one," Sister Rose said, sighing. "She's a pistol, that one. Smart as a whip, but full of trouble. Just like you."

Sister Rose patted his arm again, then the smile dropped from her face.

"What is it?" Storm asked.

"I just . . . I worry, Derrick. I'm not the spring chicken I used to be. I worry about what will happen when I'm no longer here."

"Why? Where you going?" Storm asked, his eyebrow arched. "Don't tell me: You're finally taking me up on my offer to run away to Saint-Tropez with me. Don't worry. You'll love it there. Great topless beaches."

"Derrick Storm!" she said, playfully slapping his shoulder. "You look like this big, strong man, but underneath it all you're just a wee knave."

Storm grinned. Sister Rose turned serious again: "The Lord has given me many blessed years on this mortal coil, but you know it won't last forever. When he calls me, I have to go. He's my boss, you know."

"Yeah. Speaking of which, you ought to talk to him about his 401(k) plan. I was looking at your—"

Storm was interrupted by a ring from his satellite phone. He glared at it, considered ignoring it. It rang again. It was coming in from "RESTRICTED," which meant he could guess its origin.

"Now, answer your phone, Derrick," Sister Rose scolded. "I'll not have you shirking your work on my watch."

Storm let two more rings go by, and then when Sister Rose scowled at him, he tapped the answer button.

“Storm Investigations,” he said. “This is Derrick Storm, proprietor.”

“Yeah, I think my lover is cheating on me. Can you dive into the bushes outside a seedy motel, take some pictures?” came that familiar, gravelly voice he had last heard in Venice two days earlier.

Jedediah Jones was one of the few people left in Storm’s life who knew he had once been a down-on-his-luck private investigator, a decorated Marine Corps veteran turned ham-and-egg dick who actually did spend his share of time in just such bushes—if he was lucky enough to even *have* work. That was before a woman named Clara Strike had discovered Storm. They became partners. And lovers. And even though it ended badly, the lasting legacy of their relationship was that she had introduced him to the CIA and turned him over to Jones.

It was Jones who’d trained Storm, established him as a CIA contractor, and eventually turned him into what he was today: one of the CIA’s go-to fixers, an outsider who could do what needed to be done without some of the legal encumbrances that sometimes weighed down the agency’s agents. Jones’s career had thrived with many of Storm’s successes.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Storm said, playing along. “I know you’re hurt by what your lover is doing. But I don’t take pictures of goats.”

“Very funny, Storm,” Jones said. “But joke time is over. I’ve got something with your name on it.”

“Forget it. I told you after Venice that I was taking a long vacation. And I mean to take it. Sister Rose and I are going to Saint-Tropez.”

Storm winked at the nun.

“Save it. This is bigger than your vacation.”

“My life was so much better when I was dead,” Storm said wistfully. He was only half-kidding. For four years, Storm had been considered killed in action. There were even witnesses who swore they saw him die. They never knew that the big, messy exit wound that had appeared in the back of his head was really just high-tech CIA fakery, or that the entire legend of Storm’s death

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had been orchestrated—then perpetuated—by Jones, who had his own devious reasons for needing the world to think Storm was gone. Storm had spent those four years fishing in Montana, snorkeling in the Caymans, hiking in the Appalachians, donning disguises so he could join his father at Orioles games, and generally having a grand time of things.

“Yeah, well, you had your fun,” Jones said. “Your country needs you, Storm.”

“And why is that?”

“Because a high-profile Swiss banker was killed in Zurich yesterday,” Jones said, then hit Storm with the hammer: “There are pictures of the killer on their way to us. He’s been described as having an eye patch. And the banker was missing six fingernails.”

Storm reflexively stiffened. That killer—with that M.O.—could only mean one thing: Gregor Volkov was back.

“But he’s dead,” Storm growled.

“Yeah, well, so were you.”

“Who is he working for this time?”

“We’re not a hundred percent sure,” Jones said. “But my people have picked up some talk on the street that a Chinese agent may be involved.”

“Okay. I’ll take my briefing now if you’re ready.”

“No, not over the phone,” Jones said. “We need you to come back to the cubby for that.”

The cubby was Jones’s tongue-in-cheek name for the small fiefdom he had carved out of the National Clandestine Service.

“I’ll be on the next plane,” Storm said.

“Great. I’ll have a car meet you at the airport. Just let me know what flight you’ll be on.”

“No way,” Storm said. “You know that’s not the way I operate.”

Storm could practically hear Jones rubbing his buzz-cut head. “I wish you could be a little more transparent with me, Storm.”

“Forget it,” Storm said, then repeated the mantra he had delivered many times before: “Transparency gets you killed.”