

Killing Sacred

An Alex Sullivan Zen Mystery

Nancy O'Hara

Author of ONE HAND KILLING

4

Albuquerque

Kate stood with her arms crossed against her chest and looked down on the dead body. There was no blood, but there had been nothing natural in the dying. The distorted angle of the head, legs and arms akimbo, body spread on the rumpled bedclothes as if it had been dropped from on high, told part of the story. The absence of all personal effects told the rest. She was sure the ME would later confirm what she knew in her cop's bones. It didn't take a genius. Murder, pure and simple, stared up at her.

Kate's long, straight blonde hair was pulled off her face and wrapped in a twisted bun on the back of her head. A few loose strands of hair were in her face, annoying her. She swiped at them to no effect and grumbled something under her breath. Her partner, Pete, stood on the other side of the bed, his eyes bloodshot, the slump of his shoulders making his usually beefy chest look like it was caving in on itself. They were both exhausted from two weeks of twelve-hour days without a break.

"Wasn't a heart attack, that's for damn sure," Pete said. "Neck had something wrapped around it and I doubt it was a piece of jewelry."

"Yeah, this wasn't by his own hand or his higher power's," Kate said.

"Animal goes by the name human wrecked havoc on this poor slob."

"Wonder what he did to get someone this pissed. 'Cept for the shaved head he looks pretty ordinary." Kate leaned over the razored head to look closer at the neck. "Pete, take a look at this, could be blood."

Pete walked around the bed and they both bent over to get a closer look.

"Shit, I take back the regular guy bullshit." Kate stood up and rubbed her lower back. "Nothing normal about that. S'not blood, looks more like ink, maybe a tattoo. We'll have to wait for Plotzie to turn him over, get a good look."

"These ain't normal guy pants either," Pete said. "Elastic at the ankles, drawstring at the waist, and they're not sweat pants. No way this guy was hanging with locals."

"Nothing here says it, but I'll bet he was connected with those church robberies."

"Yeah, maybe why this place is cleaned out. Whoever did this took the loot."

"Shit, Alex will be pissed."

"Who's Alex?"

"Friend from back east, coming to visit. Meant to tell you I was planning to take some vacation time I got coming."

“She the cop buddy you told me about?”

“Yeah.”

“She’ll get it then.”

“Yeah, she’ll get it. Okay ... I’m the one who’s pissed, she’ll understand. She’s from the streets of New York, so she’s seen more than her fair share of dead assholes—not to mention having plans fucked with all the time.

“It’s just, well, damn, I was looking forward to some time off, spending it with her. Now there’s no way the captain will allow it. Not that anyone’s gonna mourn this character”—Kate indicated the stiff on the mattress with a tilt of her head—“but killing’s killing and even this guy, dead or not, criminal or not, deserves some sort of justice. And the motherfucker who did this is still out there to kill again.”

Kate jammed her fists into her pockets, scowled at the corpse as if it were all his fault and muttered to herself for a while. After a few beats, the task of dealing with the crime scene took over and settled her into a working groove. She had three hours till Alex touched down.

“It’s been what, four or five years since you were here last?” Kate fastened her seatbelt and handed Alex a bottle of water. “Here, keep the liquids flowing ... dehydration can be a bitch.”

“Thanks ... four years is just about right, plus a few months.” Alex took a long pull on the water and luxuriated in the dry desert heat.

“Too long, my friend.”

“Exactly. I can hardly believe how fast time shoots by. I was coming up on my fortieth, remember?”

“Mmmm. We had some fun.” Kate pulled out of the No Parking space and hit the horn twice at the SUV that was slowly cruising the curb. She looked over at Alex. “Once you got over your freak out about being thirty-nine going on forty, that is.”

“Oh god, don’t remind me. The Chrissie Hynde and Neil Young concert almost made me proud to be so old, they still looked and sounded so amazing.”

“Yeah, those rockers, even with all the fast living, if they’re still playing and singing they are almost ageless. I bet you’ll look as good as she looks when you get to be that old.”

“Thanks for that, but she’s got something I’ll never have. The cool factor. That’s what makes her look so great.”

“Aw c’mon, Alex. You may not have a guitar strapped to your body and maybe you can’t belt out a tune, but even she’d call you cool for carrying a gun and chasing bad guys.”

“Maybe back then. But now I’m forty-four and old enough to retire for God’s sake! Can you believe it?” Alex moaned.

“What is it with you and age? You don’t look a day over thirty-four. Although that old lady attitude will put you in a home playing checkers faster than you can say granny. What the hell happened to you?”

“It’s been a rough year.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

“Let’s get to your place first. I need a shower before I do anything. We can talk more over a beer and burrito a little later. D’you mind?”

“No problem,” Kate said. “Okay if I talk?”

“I’d love it.” Alex slouched down in her seat and closed her eyes, soothed by the sound of Kate’s voice, the desert clime, and the freedom to do nothing.

“... and the sex, ooh man, the sex,” Kate purred.

“Whoa, Kate, slow down. I must’ve missed something. Sex, what sex?” Alex sat up and turned her full attention to her friend. Neither of them were very good at keeping in touch between visits so there was always a lot of catching up to do. They’d reconnect as though no time at all had passed, but it took a while to get current on the details.

“You didn’t hear anything else I said, did you?”

“Sorry, guess I’m more exhausted than I thought.”

“We can do this later.”

“Are you kidding? Tease me with sex and then stop? I’m wide awake now, you’ve got my attention. Do tell.”

Kate had been even unluckier in love than Alex. Transplanted three thousand miles from the city she was born and raised in was a geographic solution to the problem of her abusive ex-husband, Jerry, who wouldn’t stop hounding her even after they got divorced and she moved away.

Since moving to New Mexico Kate had dated some cowboys and Indians, had even tried a few cowgirls, thinking that that was her problem, but she never let anyone get too close. Alex was thrilled to hear her friend so excited about someone.

“Well, he’s in the department ...”

“He’s a cop?”

Kate nodded.

“Ooohhh boy ...” Alex said.

“It’s not like that out here. Cops here are different than back east. And this one, he’s half Indian, half Irish, very sexy. People sometimes mistake him for Johnny Depp.”

“Ooh-la-la.”

“Young though.”

“How young?”

“Not sure I want to tell you ... you with your ageist slant on things.”

“Aw, c’mon, Kate. Gimme a break. As long as he’s tickling your you-know-what I don’t care how old or young he is, long as it’s legal.”

“Oh, he’s legal all right, but what he does to me must be illegal somewhere.”

“I’m not sure I want to know about this,” Alex teased.

“Truth is, sex is just a part of it, a fabulous part of it, no question. But I don’t know ... there’s something else. I really like this guy. He’s only thirty! I must be crazy, tell me I’m crazy, I can’t fall for him. I’m too old for him. I could almost be his mother. In fact I met his mother and she’s only a few years older than me. That was weird. He likes older women. Maybe ’cause his mother raised him—she definitely has that cool factor we were talking about—after his father left before he was even born. They were never married, of course, and Sam doesn’t seem to want to get married, says he doesn’t want kids. But I don’t believe him, he loves kids, works with Native kids every chance he gets.” Kate stopped abruptly.

“What is it Kate? Why’d you stop?”

“You think I’m crazy.”

“Au contraire. I’ve never seen you so happy and excited about anyone. I’m happy for you. When do I get to meet him?”

“Maybe tonight.”

“Maybe?”

“Well, he’s planning on it. But you know how police work goes ... there’s this case—”

“Say no more, I get it.” Alex stretched and yawned. “I’ve got two luscious weeks with nothing to do. Surely he’ll sneak some time to see you while I’m here and I won’t be far away.

“And,” Alex added, with a threat of mischief, “he’ll want to meet someone who knows all about you.”

“Don’t you dare tell him what a nerd I used to be. He thinks I’m a hip, sexy, city girl.”

“And whatever I tell him won’t change his mind about that. Hope he doesn’t get jealous about us spending so much time together while I’m here.”

“He’s not the jealous type.”

“Far cry from Jerry then, eh?”

“Couldn’t be more different.” Kate didn’t have the heart yet to break the news that she’d be harder to pin down than a shadow during Alex’s vacation and wouldn’t have the time to spend as they’d planned. But Alex was a big girl, she’d understand. Still, she felt guilty.

“It’s so good to see you, Alex. We just don’t see enough of each other. I wish I had the nerve to visit New York, not leave it all up to you coming here.”

“You think Jerry would know or even care at this point?”

Kate looked at Alex as if she’d lost her mind.

“Oh, right,” Alex said. “I forgot. He’s a bastard.”

“Got that right. And till he finds a replacement to torment, I’m still it.”

“That sucks.”

“Yup. He ...” Kate fell silent and concentrated on driving.

“What? He, what?”

“I don’t want to ruin your vacation, let’s talk about you. Tell me about this guy you’re seeing. His name is Guy, right? Is that weird?”

“Let’s save that for later. I want to know about Jerry. You look pissed or scared. What the hell did he do now?”

“He showed up out of the blue at the station about three, four weeks ago. I wasn’t there, I’m sure he knew that. Introduced himself to everyone as my husband. My husband!”

“Shit, what happened? Did you see him? Did he come to your house?”

“Never saw the creep, but he was snooping around I’m sure of it. He’s a slippery bastard though, so even if he was there I wouldn’t have been able to get my mitts on him. He’s gone now, so let’s change the subject. Pleeeezzz ...”

“Damn. Why can’t I get it after all this time that he’s not one of the good guys?”

“Always been hard for you to think bad of anyone once they get into your circle,” Kate said.

“S’pose you’re right. It’s like I got this wall up and once you’re inside my instincts short circuit.”

“Something like that.”

“So, what? I’m not perfect? That what you’re saying?”

“Something like that.”

“Ooohhh, that hurts.” They both laughed and then lapsed into a comfortable silence for the last few miles.

As they drove into Kate’s driveway, Alex said, “Your house looks amazing Kate, the oasis I’ve been dreaming about. Thanks for having me. I’m so glad to be here.”

“No need to thank me—you’re welcome anytime, you know that.” Kate eased slowly to the top of the drive and turned off the ignition. The noise of the engine cut off, dropping them into quietness. The contrast struck Alex as profound.

“But I have some bad news.” Kate had to get it over with.

Alex tensed up. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened ... well, a lot’s happened, but that’s not the news. But because of all that’s happened—I won’t go into it now, or ever if you don’t want—I may not be able to take any time off while you’re here. It sucks ... you know how it goes.”

“Boy, do I ever.”

“The bad guys just won’t honor our vacation schedules. There’s a big case right now and the department can’t afford to have me gone. Besides, I want to catch the bastards.”

“What’d they do?”

“Let’s save that for another time. You’re on vacation for Christ sakes ...”

“Guess I’m not so good at that.”

Kate took Alex’s suitcase out of the trunk. “I can take a few minutes, help get you settled, then I’ve got to get back.”

Kate unlocked and opened the front door and they were met with a cool, shaded living room. The hidden swamp cooler, the ceiling fan, and the shades drawn against the heat of the sun did their jobs making the space an inviting respite from the dry, sunny outdoors. It felt like a cool drink in the shade on a scorching hot day. And not nearly as startling as walking into a cold, air conditioned room on a hot August day in New York. There was harmony here between the inside and outside. Walking into Kate’s home made Alex feel welcome and the thought that she could live in this climate made its usual appearance.

“I’m sorry you can’t take some time while I’m here, but I’m not surprised.”

“I feel awful about it.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.” Alex wouldn’t say it out loud, but she was a little relieved. As much as she loved Kate, she wanted some time alone in the desert.

“It’s not you I’m worried about, it’s me. I haven’t had a break in months,” Kate moaned.

“I know the feeling.”

“But I’ll try like hell to sneak at least a day while you’re here.”

“I hope so. We’ll go up to Ojo Caliente, get a massage, soak in some mud and hot springs.”

“God, wouldn’t that be yummy? But right now I gotta run. There’s a ton of food in the fridge, plenty of beer and other liquid refreshments. Help yourself, take a nap, the hammock in the backyard is a great place for that.”

A car horn tooted softly out front.

“There’s Sam now. Here’s a set of my house keys, and my car keys, in case you want to go out. The car’s yours while you’re here. Sam’s offered to chauffeur me around. We’re on the same schedule ... sort of.”

“That’s very generous of you.”

“Selfish really. I love being treated like a queen. Never knew that about myself, but hey, it fits.”

“Looks good on you, too. You deserve it.”

There was another toot of the horn, not insistent, just a gentle reminder.

“Now go, get out of here.”

“There’s—”

“I know where everything is, I’ll be fine, really. Go to your Prince Charming.”

“Okay, bye.” Kate hugged Alex. “I’m so glad you’re here. And I promise not to spend every night with him. I’ve so looked forward to a late night gab session with you.”

“Yeah, me too. We’ve got lots to catch up on. See you later.”

The door clicked shut, the car backed out of the driveway and wheeled away out of hearing. Alex was alone. It was quiet except for the soft whirr of the fan overhead and the purring of Ed, Kate’s nineteen-pound orange tabby that had been around since Kate’s first day in New Mexico, in the corner rocking chair right where Alex had last seen him almost five years ago.

Will I be happy five years from now if I leave the force and start living the life of Ed? What the hell would retirement mean anyway? And what the hell would I do next?

She had no energy to face these questions. Instead, she took a quick shower, changed into shorts and a T-shirt, grabbed a tumbler of iced tea and her Tony Hillerman book, and flip-flopped her way to the shaded backyard. She stretched out in the hammock and fell asleep in the first paragraph.

Something shocked her awake an hour later and she couldn’t tell if it was in her internal or external environment. She bolted upright and nearly spilled over onto the ground. *Fuck, I hate hammocks.* She finally got her feet to the ground and stood up, becoming mildly dizzy. There was nothing to hold on to. She stood still until the vertigo passed. Her patience for the healing process was stretched to its limit and a small worry nagged at her deep inside a brain she couldn’t trust anymore. She wished she could remember how she fell off her bike in the first place. *Maybe my brain was on the fritz even before the accident? Damn it. I will not make a good old person.*

Copyright © 2014 by Nancy O'Hara

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system without the prior written permission of the publisher.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places or events is purely coincidental.

Published by NOH Books, New York, New York

Cover Art by Carl Graves

Nancy O'Hara is a meditation coach in real life who kills people in her fiction. She is the author of six books on the subject of mindfulness and meditation, including the bestselling *Find a Quiet Corner*, and two novels in the Alex Sullivan Zen Mystery series. Along with her writing, Nancy shares her experience through her Mindful Life Coaching practice, meditation classes, workshops, and retreats. She lives in New York City with her perfectly imperfect husband, trees outside her windows and noisy upstairs neighbors.