

A NUN TOO MANY

Plot Summary - Chapter by Chapter Breakdown

Notes: We have left several details of this story vague, so you can give them a personal touch. You can tailor this outline in several of the following ways to make it unique, without changing the main plot. 1) Sister Isabelle doesn't have to be the mother superior of the convent. 2) The story may be set in any town, village or community of your choice. 3) Detective Regent may have a bigger role to play. 4) Sergeant Detroit may have a bigger role to play in the investigation. 5) Leon, the fisherman may have had some contact with Sister Agnes and may have taught her how to tie a noose. 6) Change the ending – Sister Agnes may commit suicide, ruining what she has done to her parents.

Part One - Rising Tension

Chapter One

CH 1/Scene 1 – The inside of the village church is decorated with white flowers, ribbons, and all the candles are lit as if a marriage is about to be sealed before God. And there will be such a wedding indeed. Sister Agnes, the novice, is going to be ordained in the order of St. Marie du Port in Ville d'Ecluse. She comes out of the convent and walks down the aisle dressed in the most beautiful bridal gown the congregation has ever seen. Apparently she has stitched the dress herself for weeks prior to her being wed to Jesus Christ. The congregation has not attended an ordination in over fifty years, and everyone and anyone came to church that morning. Father Simeon is going to officiate. When he hears the organ announcing the young bride's arrival, he stands up from kneeling in prayer, turns around, opens his arms to welcome the congregation and the novice, and falls flat on his face to the floor.

CH 1/Scene 2 – Screams of surprise, concern and then horror echo throughout the church. The novice, who was to be ordained, falls to her knees while Mother Superior – Sister Isabelle – moves quickly and kneels beside the body of Father Simeon. She crosses herself when she realizes that the good father is dead. She looks to the stunned congregation and shakes her head in response to their querying gazes. Amid the crowd a voice is heard. A man frays himself a passage between the pews and tells everyone in attendance that he is a doctor. He rushes to the body, kneels down and confirms that Father Simeon has passed away. However, when he turns the dead man's face to the side, he tells Sister Isabelle that her priest has possibly died from cyanide poisoning.

CH 1/Scene 3 – Horrified, Sister Isabelle, rushes to the vestry and uses the telephone on the desk to call the local police. When Detective Regent and Sergeant Detroit arrive at the church, they find the congregation and the nuns gathered in little muttering clumps around the church's front steps. Some people have gone home – not wanting to be involved – and others are standing by the open doorway, waiting for a sign – something that would let them go back inside the church. Sister Isabelle meets the two officers and leads them to where the body still lay behind the altar.

CH 1/Scene 4 – Detective Ambrose Regent finds it odd that anyone would murder a priest. Evidently the man was a homicide victim if the doctor in attendance is to be believed, unless, of course the good father committed suicide. The detective shrugs the thought away and asks Sergeant Detroit to have the inside of the church cordoned off to the public and to call the forensic team to the scene. While they wait for the team, the sergeant and a constable take the name of the nuns that attended the ceremony and tell them they will interview them one by one later in the day. It's about eleven o'clock in the morning when the forensic team arrives with their equipment.

CH 1/Scene 5 – Sister Isabelle objects to the planned individual interviews. She proposes to have Father Jerome from the neighboring village (30 miles away) attend the interviews as a chaperon. Detective Regent has heard of Father Jerome's sleuthing prowess and is not too keen in having a man of the cloth invade his investigative territory. Yet, when he phones the captain to tell him what's happening, the latter tells Regent to listen to Father Jerome carefully and not to ruffle the church's feathers. The Bishop is apparently not a man to be "messed with".

Chapter Two

CH 2/Scene 1 – When Father Jerome arrives at the village, he has to smile. He has not set foot in this part of the world for years. It has all the character traits of a community nestled in the Alps somewhere in Europe. No one could believe this village is only a few miles away from the US border. He was here on a couple of occasions – baptism and such like – but never in circumstances such as these. A murder is never something that leaves pleasant memories in anyone's mind. When he parks his Austin Mini in the small parking lot beside the church and gets out of the car, his cassock leaves no doubt in anyone's mind as to his identity.

CH 2/Scene 2 – Sister Isabelle comes out of the church to meet Father Jerome and introduces him to Detective Ambrose Regent. There is a sign of recognition in Ambrose's eyes. He's seen the priest before today. Father Jerome smiles and shakes hands with him and his sergeant. When the detective inquires as to where they might have met before, Father Jerome tells him that he knew Ambrose's father and he had occasion to come to their house more than once before the dear man passed away.

CH 2/Scene 3 – The afternoon begins by visiting the morgue where Wilbert Daniels, the island's ME, confirms the fact that Father Simeon did indeed die of cyanide poisoning. He cannot tell the detective how the poison was ingested. It could not have been during communion – the ceremony was that of a marriage, not a mass. Father Simeon had a healthy breakfast, which was partly digested, but none of what he ate contained any trace of cyanide. When asked how much cyanide would be required to kill such a big fellow as Father Simeon, Dr. Daniels tells them that only a milligram of poison would suffice.

CH 2/Scene 4 – As the detective, his sergeant and Father Jerome come out of the morgue, they see a small van driving down the street. Father Jerome stares at the grapes decals on the side of the van for a few seconds and then asks if Detective Regent knows if the nunnery produces wine from vineyard he saw growing on the hills beside the church and convent. "Yes," is the answer. The sisters have been making wine for over seventy years. Sergeant Detroit tells the detective and the father that it's quite a palatable wine. His family has been buying bottles of their red Cabernet for years apparently.

CH 2/Scene 5 – However, Father Jerome is not interested in the wine's quality at the moment, he's curious to know if the sisters use potassium cyanide in their wine-making process. He has heard something about this eventuality when he was looking after a parish in Kelowna – another wine region of Canada. He does not say anything to his two companions for the moment. He has no intention of leading them on what could possibly be the wrong track. Detective Regent suggests they return to the convent to start interviewing the nuns.

Chapter Three

CH 3/Scene 1 – The first sister to be interviewed is Sister Agnes. Having donned her novice habit once again, she shows all the signs of a young lady utterly distraught by what has happened at the start of the ceremony. She has no idea as to who would want to harm Father Simeon. He took over her teaching when Father George passed away a year ago. She is issued from a wine-making family herself and is involved in the process of curing the kegs and vats in the winery during the winter.

CH 3/Scene 2 – When it's Sister Isabelle's turn to be interviewed, she is strangely reticent to answer question regarding the wine making process. As Mother Superior of the convent, she knows the history of every woman living with her for the past twenty-five years. Yes, she was a novice in Montreal, but moved to the West Coast of Canada soon after her ordination. She does not want to speak of the past nor the reasons that made her transfer to Ville d'Ecluse necessary all those years ago.

CH 3/Scene 3 – Next to be interviewed is the oldest sister in the convent. She is the wine-maker of the convent. She learned her trade from her father. Yes, they keep small quantities of potassium cyanide in the cellar. No, she does not use any in the wine-making process. As for curing, there are many other and safer methods to cure or clean the vats than the use of cyanide. In fact, the little cyanide Sister Angelina keeps in the basement cupboard is to kill the rats or field mice that come in and invade the place in the spring.

CH 3/Scene 4 – Father Jerome is glad not to have ignited the cyanide fire in the detective and sergeant's minds at this point. Yet, the presence of cyanide in the convent will probably make things a lot simpler when it will come to finding out who used it and why. To kill a priest in such a manner is vengeful and “almost demonic”, Father Jerome remarks to his companions before leaving the parish to return to his own village.

Part Two - Main Action

Chapter Four

CH 4/Scene 1 – The next time Father Jerome is called upon to assist Detective Regent in his investigation happens the next day. He is surprised. However, Ambrose Regent tells him that Sister Isabelle has been found strangled – hanged actually – from one of the cellar's overhead beams. Father Jerome rushes over to the village to find the nuns in the church praying for their sister's soul. He tells them to return to their rooms and that the detective will need to speak to them again.

CH 4/Scene 2 – Meanwhile, Wilbert Daniels comes back to the village to examine the body of Sister Isabelle. At first glance the sister seemed to have been strangled to death with the same noose that hanged her later. Detective Regent is baffled. Obviously Sister Isabelle had something to hide, judging from the answers she gave during her interview. What was she hiding and why killing her now?

CH 4/ Scene 3 – Father Jerome goes back to the church to try putting the pieces of this puzzle together. He believes the answers reside in the reasons for Sister Isabelle's transfer to the West Coast. He tells Ambrose Regent that he will be contacting the Bishop to obtain Sister Isabelle and Father Simeon's dossiers. These ‘dossiers’ reveal a detail record of the men and women in the Holy Orders. In the meantime, Ambrose asks the forensic team to go through the cellar, church and Sister Isabelle's room and office with a fine toothcomb.

CH 4/ Scene 4 – When the autopsy is completed, a strange fact comes to light. Sister Isabelle had a child several years ago. This is confirmed when Father Jerome receives the dossiers on both Father Simeon and Sister Isabelle. Apparently the sister entered the Orders knowing that she was pregnant. As soon as the child was born it was given for adoption. Soon after being ordained, Sister Isabelle was transferred to the St. Marie Convent in Ville d'Ecluse to put some distance between her and the events that occurred in Montreal.

CH 4/ Scene 5 – As for Father Simeon, his story is somewhat similar to that of Sister Isabelle. Father Simeon was new to the parish of Ville d'Ecluse. He came to Vancouver Island only a year ago. He had lived in Montreal for many years and had entered the orders after an incident that saw the end of his teaching career. Soon after his arrival in the village, he began teaching the young Sister Agnes.

Chapter 5

CH 5/ Scene 1 – When Father Jerome asks if there was a change in Mother Superior's attitude when Father Simeon arrived at the parish, Sister Angelina is hesitant, but says that yes, Mother Superior was quite reluctant to talk to him, except for confession. Even then, she apparently displayed reticence. Father Jerome decides to alert the detective of the relationship that might have existed between the two victims.

CH 5/ Scene 2 – Next, Father Jerome and Detective Regent interview the young novice again. Sister Agnes tells them that she arrived at the convent some three years ago. When pressed, Sister Agnes says that Father Simeon displayed a particular liking for her. She in return could not see the reason for his devoted or unwarranted attention. She liked Sister Isabelle very much but she found Father Simeon a little too ‘curious’ about her childhood. Yes, she was adopted and, no, she does not know who her birth parents are.

CH 5/ Scene 3 – It is quite clear to both Father Jerome and Detective Regent that Sister Agnes is Sister Isabelle's daughter. Perhaps, her father is none other than Father Simeon. A DNA test soon proves their assumption to be correct. But neither Father Jerome nor Detective Regent are any closer to finding the

murderer of Sister Agnes's parents. It would have been relatively easy for any of the nuns to poison Father Simeon – they all knew where the cyanide jar was kept. However, when it came to lifting Sister Isabelle's body and hang her from the cellar's beam, it would need more than one person to do it.

CH 5/ Scene 4 – It is imperative for Detective Regent now to examine the sisters' daily routine and schedule. He wants to find out who is most likely to have had access to the cyanide stored in the cellar. Sister Angelina has temporarily taken over the running of the convent. She tells the detective that most of the work in late summer and early fall is done in the vineyards. The picking is done by young men and women that come to work in the vineyards for a couple of weeks every year. None of the workers have access to the convent and would have any reason to kill the priest or Mother Superior.

CH 5/Scene 5 – When it comes to the work done in the winery and in the cellar, Sister Angelina and Sister Agnes (with Mother Superior before her passing) are the ones minding the process. They have some part-time workers who come to the convent when needed, but there again these people would not have any reason to kill the priest or Sister Isabelle. Father Jerome has returned to his parish and decides to examine another angle of the crime – the noose that hanged Sister Isabelle. It takes a certain kind of rope and some knowledge of how to tie a noose to hang someone in that manner. The sisters do not possess such knowledge.

CH 5/Scene 6 – The village of Qualicum Beach, where Father Jerome lives, is populated by fishermen. These people know how to tie knots and what sort of ropes is used for various tasks. His friend Leon, a young fisherman who's learned "the ropes" (pardon the pun), from his father tells Father Jerome that tying a noose is far from easy. The rope needs to support more than the person's weight to be effective. It is not designed to strangle but to cut respiration in the first instance and then to throttle the victim under his own weight. Father asks Leon if someone could strangle a person with a noose. Leon replies that it's a little silly but yes, you could do it.

CH 5/Scene 7 – Armed of this new information, Father Jerome returns to the convent to assist Detective Regent in his investigation. When Father Jerome tells the young detective that an outsider must have assisted the culprit by bringing the noose into the convent, Ambrose Regent tells Father Jerome that unfortunately no one had to come from the outside to bring rope or ready-made noose to the convent – the sisters have such items in the tractor shed. They do not use them these days, but a long time ago, according to Sister Angelina, the church had been asked to keep the gallows' nooses for the constabulary.

Part Three - Resolution

Chapter Six

CH 6/ Scene 1 – Ambrose Regent has to smile at the Father's obvious disappointment. However, the good thing about this discovery is that it reduces the list of suspects considerably. Sister Angelina had opportunity to use the cyanide and ropes – she is in contact with such items on a daily basis. Sister Agnes not only had access to the same items but could also have had a motive to take the life of the mother who gave her for adoption. But did Sister Agnes have a real motive to kill Father Simeon?

CH 6/Scene 2 – In the days that follow, Father Jerome and Detective Regent discover that Sister Agnes had suffered rape at the hands of Father Simeon. The latter did not know he was her father until Sister Isabelle told him. The young novice was unforgiving. As soon as she discovered the truth, she planned Father Simeon's murder. She took a small sachet of cyanide out of the cupboard cellar and coated Father Simeon's candies with it. She knew he would take some in his pocket and consume them during prayer. And that's exactly what he did.

CH 6/Scene 3 – Since hearing Sister Agnes's confession to the detective, Father Jerome cannot accept the proposition of a young girl killing her mother by herself. He tells Ambrose Regent that she's obviously protecting someone. It would have been physically impossible for the slim girl to pull the rope, hoist her mother's body and hang it from the cellar's beam. Father Jerome needs to hear the sisters' church confessions. He wants to hear from the culprit's own lips that she killed their Mother Superior. To his

utmost surprise, each and every sister – all twelve of them – confess to having assisted Sister Agnes in the deed. They killed Sister Isabelle together. Their motive is clear: Mother Superior was afraid to report Father Simeon's salacious behavior not only toward her own daughter but toward the younger sisters in her convent to the Bishop.

CH 6/Scene 4 – Dumbfounded, Father Jerome wants to have a word with the young novice before she is formally arrested and taken into custody. Sister Agnes tells Father Jerome that she loved her mother as any child would, but for her to have taken refuge in the Holy Orders to avoid the work it would have taken to raise a child as a single mother was sinful in her eyes. Moreover, Sister Agnes tells Father Jerome that she couldn't understand why her mother would still bow in front of the man who abused her and raped her. It was more than she could take. Lastly, when her mother forced her to answer to the very priest who violated and molested her, Sister Agnes could not take it anymore. These two had to be punished.

CH 6/Scene 5 – Upon leaving the rectory, Father Jerome decides to keep his mouth shut for the time being. He returns home and phones the Bishop. The latter tells the priest that the sisters will be judged and punished in due course – the Lord will see to it. However, Sister Agnes will have to bear the burden of intent and of having strangled her own mother before being strung up to the cellar's beam. Father Jerome imparts the Bishop's message during a private mass with the convent sisters. He will see to it that they live in complete seclusion for the next twenty years. The winery and vineyards will be sold by order of the Bishop – the proceeds from the sale will serve to see to the sisters' future livelihood. As for Sister Agnes, since she has confessed to the crime and since there were mitigating circumstances surrounding the motive, she will probably serve part of her sentence as a parolee.

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