

MIDNIGHT MASS

The Crime

An Amos Freeman Thriller

Andrew Delaplaine

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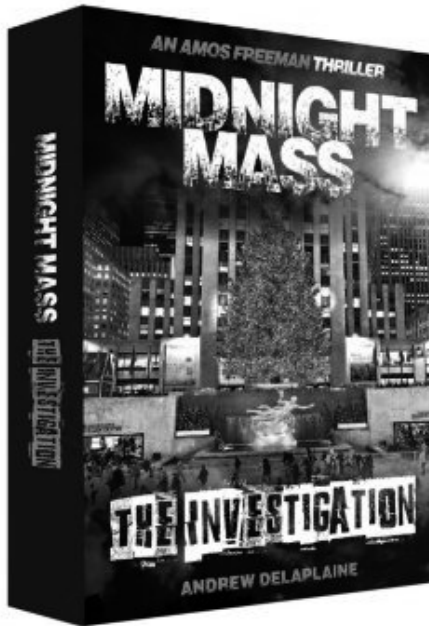


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After the spectacular robbery of Trinity Church on Christmas Eve, Detective Amos Freeman finds himself sucked into a vortex of political intrigue and corruption.



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A list of the author's other thrillers, as well as his titles for children and travel guidebooks, can be found at the end of this book.

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Chapter 1

An eight-year-old black paneled Chevy van made its way down Broadway, slowed by unusually heavy traffic, even for 9:35 on Christmas Eve. The driver was supposed to continue down Broadway till he reached Rector Street, take a right and park behind Trinity Church in a narrow street called Trinity Place.

“It’s bumper-to-bumper.”

“Take the next right. Go the back way,” came a voice from behind him in the darkened van.

The driver took a right at Cedar Street, went west two blocks and took a left on Greenwich Street, then a left on Rector Street, and then a final left onto dark and narrow Trinity Place where he found himself directly behind the historic church.

He pulled up before an empty space protected by a bagged meter and two orange traffic cones. A man in a dark suit got out of the passenger side and moved the orange cones and the driver backed neatly into the empty space. The man in the dark suit got back into the van and the driver killed the engine.

They were now parked about twelve feet from a back door that led to a warren of minor staff offices in the basement and first floor of the church.

The driver tilted his head to his right and spoke over his shoulder.

“I did a little reading up on the Internet. Said George Washington went to church here.”

“We got an hour to kill,” said the voice in the dark. “So just shut the fuck up.”

Chapter 2

Two blocks from Trinity Church down Wall Street on the seventh floor of the building occupied by the prestigious investment house of Gerard, Nugent & Company, Charles Kolsnar was in his office filling his Peal & Co. briefcase with \$200 million dollars worth of bonds made out to “Bearer” that could be negotiated on any financial market in the world for seventy cents on the dollar.

Charlie Kolsnar was chief of the Bond Security Division of Gerard, Nugent. The bonds were due to be turned over by him the first working day after the holidays, but Kolsnar and the bonds would be long gone without a trace by then.

He eased the lid of his briefcase shut and locked it, breathing deeply of its fine leather and dropping the key casually into his side coat pocket. He glanced at his Rolex Oyster Perpetual Submariner: 10:46 P.M.

Plenty of time.

Earlier, he'd ordered Gerard, Nugent's corporate jet, a G550, to be made ready for him at the Teterboro executive airport in New Jersey where it was kept, in the hangar right next to Donald Trump's. They said it would be ready by 2 A.M., so he had three hours.

Since it was Christmas Eve, he told the dispatcher to book any pilots available on such short notice so the regular pilots would not have their Christmas Eve ruined. (He hadn't wanted to use the company's regular pilots on this flight—he knew them, and they knew him, too well.) The G-5 would take him to Mexico City where the crew would be told to wait for ten to twelve hours while Kolsnar conducted “urgent company business.”

But while the crew waited, Kolsnar would already be on another chartered plane, paying with cash (they asked very few questions down there) out of Mexico City bound for Lima. There, he'd take another private plane to Sao Paulo, and from there, another chartered plane to Buenos Aires. From Buenos Aires, he'd take the ferry across the Rio de

la Plata to Montevideo in Uruguay. He'd pick up the car he garaged in Calle Durazno and drive along the coast toward Punta del Este, and in a couple of hours he'd be in the beach house he'd secretly owned for three years in sleepy Aqua Dulces, directly on the ocean, a half-hour north of Punta del Este.

No one would find him. Hell, it would be a whole day before the pilots realized he might not even be coming back. They'd check with their dispatcher in Jersey, who wouldn't be able to reach anybody at Gerard, Nugent until after January first.

A whole week before they even missed him, he laughed inside.

The best thing, Kolsnar thought, was his age—he was only thirty-five. Still plenty of time to enjoy the money.

He picked up his briefcase.

Hefty.

He smiled, left his office, and moved toward the elevator.

There was no worry about the security guards downstairs. Technically, routine security came under his authority, though an assistant handled daily operations. He'd long focused his efforts in the area of bond security, which meant he knew of and trafficked in every aspect of illegal bonds worldwide. He had full clearance, of course. (He was the one who granted clearances.) No one would dare examine his briefcase. He dealt with far too sensitive issues for any common guard to shuffle through his papers.

Once he passed through the august portals of Gerard, Nugent & Company for the last time, he was home free. He'd stroll up to Broadway, grab a taxi, and head out to Jersey in plenty of time to meet the waiting plane.

For once, Christmas Day would be worth celebrating.

The elevator doors parted in the lobby and Kolsnar ambled toward the two guards by the main entrance. When they heard his heels click on the marble foyer and saw him approaching, one of them unlocked the door and pulled it open. Harry—Kolsnar knew him well—had

been with the company for years, but he looked a little tense, worried about something. And from the queasy feeling in his stomach, Kolsnar knew the truth of the old adage that said worry begets worry. But what could there be for him to worry about?

“Take it easy, boys,” Kolsnar said with a casual smile, raising his hand in a mock salute as he passed through the enormous glass and shiny brass doors onto Wall Street.

“Excuse me, Mr. Kolsnar,” said Harry.

Kolsnar still had one foot behind him in Gerard, Nugent. His stomach muscles tightened into brick as he turned around sharply.

“I hate to ask you, Mr. Kolsnar, but I’m out of cigarettes, and this guy doesn’t smoke,” said Harry, nodding to his partner. “Could you leave me a couple?”

Kolsnar smiled and reached inside his coat to his shirt pocket and pulled out a half pack of Marlboros.

“Keep the pack, Harry. I’ve got more.”

“Thanks, Mr. Kolsnar. Merry Christmas.”

“Same to you, boys.”

Kolsnar turned and braced himself against the wintry wind and walked toward the honking horns and wall-to-wall traffic up on Broadway, a fresh sweat turning cold on his forehead.

Chapter 3

The Reverend Emory Parkhurst sat alone in his quiet office in New York's Trinity Church, the single, dull lamp on his desk barely illuminating with its pale yellow light (the color of Sauternes, he sometimes thought) the varnished mahogany with which the room had been paneled for more than two hundred years, the heavy patina giving the room an aura of dignity. His chair was turned away from his desk toward the windows that looked out into the churchyard, now black, cold and bitter. How lovely it looked in the spring when flowers and blooming trees filled the yard and sweet smells wafted through his open windows, now sealed against the harshness of December. There wasn't even a fresh snow to relieve the barrenness in the darkened yard, where, since there were no lights, he could see only the melancholy silhouettes of bare tree branches helplessly resisting the buffeting winds.

There were two soft taps at his door.

"Yes?" His voice was barely audible.

The Reverend Canon Richard Whitney, his young assistant, entered and approached the dark polished oak desk behind which Parkhurst was lost in thought. The rector glanced up and raised his patrician chin ever so slightly as if to ask what Whitney wanted.

"Mr. Quigley is up front watching the demonstrators. He asked if you could come up for a minute."

"Dear Mr. Quigley will just have to wait until I come up for the processional."

Shuddering, Parkhurst thought about what was happening in front of the church right now. There was the normal holiday street bustle, the usual stream of black limos depositing the wealthy members of Trinity Church for the midnight service. And the usual knot of horn-honking hacks bringing less well-off worshippers downtown.

What was *not* usual was the mob of over two hundred fifty members of the Front for the Liberation of Lesbian Clergy crowding side-

walks and spilling into Broadway, loudly heckling members as they marched with high chins up the stone steps leading to the narrow narthex of the church, and dangerously on the verge of breaking past the barricades set up and maintained by twenty or so of New York's finest.

"What time is it?"

"Ten-forty-eight," said Whitney without hesitation. Parkhurst noticed that his young aide hadn't even glanced at his watch. *Must've looked before he knocked.* He hoped he wasn't becoming *too* predictable as he got older.

"It's time I robed."

Whitney immediately turned toward the small dressing room that adjoined the chamber. The rector raised his hand.

"No, Richard. I'll robe myself tonight."

"As you wish, Father."

Whitney left and Parkhurst got up and walked into his dressing room where another dim light glowed. Ranged along one wall in an open alcove were his regal vestments, some, like the royal purple of Easter, he wore but once a year.

Parkhurst went to the full-length mirror framed in carved cherrywood, took off his suit jacket and loosened his clerical collar. He certainly looked his part, he'd thought so many times as he stood before this mirror. He had the distinguished head of white hair, which showed no signs of thinning, that a man in his position should have. He was six feet two. His face had the wrinkles of a fifty-nine year old man, but, along with the collar and his normal dark garb, they gave his face character and dignity. He had cold blue eyes that members of the congregation jokingly told him could see their souls a full fifteen pews back from the pulpit. He wondered for a moment how effective they were *sixteen* pews back. Still, not a bad combination of features, he told himself.

He knew he couldn't afford to distract himself any longer.

Edward Quigley, head of the vestry. Parkhurst's mind drifted back to reality and the one man on earth he hated most. Or rather, disliked. He was brought up to dislike people rather than to hate them. A small distinction in this case. He knew why Quigley wanted him now, and could see the picture going on in the narthex at this very moment: Quigley venting his anger on the two head ushers, looking down into the protesters at Parkhurst's own twenty-six year old daughter Janie, a nationally prominent lesbian and founder of the Front for the Liberation of Lesbian Clergy, one of the most militant gay organizations in the country.

Until she announced what he personally preferred to call her "proclivities" over five years ago, Parkhurst had had no reason to doubt his daughter's heterosexuality. She'd spurned all his efforts to establish a bond of any sort, always rebuffing him. One day she was what he thought was a loving daughter. The next she was a militant homosexual. Period.

She'd moved to California five years back, but returned to New York two years ago with her new "cause." He hadn't seen her anywhere in those two years except in the first few pages of the *Times*, and often on the front page. He hadn't spoken to her in those two years. It had been that long since he convinced himself reconciliation was impossible.

She was causing him more trouble now than anything he'd ever experienced in his whole life. She knew it, knew he was an easy target, and she didn't care. Her principles were more important than his career in the church and standing in the community. More important than his feelings as a clergyman. As a father. Even as a person.

Quigley openly hated him, blaming him for everything Janie did, which of course brought a great deal of negative publicity to Trinity Church. Quite literally, Parkhurst wondered how long he'd be able to keep his job as rector. There was already talk in the vestry, fomented by Quigley, of getting the bishop to ship him off to a minor parish upstate,

there to await a disgraceful retirement into oblivion. Parkhurst could never accept such a visible demotion and would be forced to resign out of hand, and Quigley knew it. He didn't care. Did anyone?

Whitney, of course. He cared deeply.

It was fast becoming a pitched battle between him and Quigley—one the rector felt he was losing.

Well, it was time. There was no putting it off any longer.

Chapter 4

Detective Lieutenant Amos Freeman hiccupped.

"I heard that!" came a shout from Big Dot at the other end of the bar where she was serving a customer.

"Fuck off," Freeman whispered, almost to himself.

Freeman knew he should be home with his wife Angie on Christmas Eve and it wasn't her so much that kept him sitting on his stool at the far end of Big Dot's Jungle Bar on Blyton Street, the last slightly sleazy street left in trendy TriBeCa.

No—his mother and father were in town.

And even *that* wasn't so bad. But her father and, God give the world a little peace, her mother was there, too—all the way from Cleveland to make their Christmas merry.

A wife you weren't fucking anymore, two parents and two in-laws.

"Five good reasons to get pissed," he said to the black label on the Jack Daniels bottle in front of him. An Australian dick he once worked with used that expression—pissed—for being drunk. He liked that. But he remembered the Australian dick as being a real pisser. In the American sense.

"What's that, Freeman?"

Big Dot—all two hundred thirty-five pounds of the big black mama—was standing on the other side of the bar facing him.

"Nuttin'."

"How you feelin'?"

"Like Superman."

"You be lookin' more like Clark *Kent*, boy. An *old* Clark Kent."

"I'm only thirty-four."

"Goin' on ninety!"

Big Dot laughed one of those laughs that seemed to inch its way up from her toenails, rumble uncertainly through her stomach, and roar out of her mouth, shaking the fake Tiffany lamps strung down the length of the bar. The chocolate brown curls on her wig bobbed up and down like Christmas baubles, joining in the merriment.

Big Dot wasn't called Big Dot as some kind of throwaway endearment. She *was* big. Big and flabby and fleshy. When Amos Freeman first saw a Reubens in the Met a few years earlier (believe it or not, that was his first time in the Met—it was on official business, of course), he immediately thought of Big Dot. If Reubens had been American, he'd have painted *Big Dot at the Jungle Bar* instead of *Venus at the Mirror*.

Oh, well.

There were only a couple of other customers in the place this late—amazing there were any at all on Christmas Eve, thought Freeman. Big Dot, signaled by an upraised arm, moved away to mix a drink.

Actually, Freeman thought, he wasn't really drunk. True, he broke the tax man's seal on this bottle, but he was only halfway down—that far in a little over an hour.

Not bad.

When he got to the bottom, he'd be *almost* drunk. He was just intoxicated now, and he hadn't crossed that delicate line (*What's so damned delicate about it?*) between intoxication—which you could snap out of when the cards called for it and run yourself at ninety percent capacity—and a drunken stupor, when you only had about thirty percent capacity left. Below that you didn't even know what a percent was. Or care.

"Fuckin' hole," Freeman whispered dismissively, looking groggily around the room. The joint was long, narrow, dirty and dark.

Long, because the place had originally been carved out of an alley so far back in time they didn't have building codes to stop such abortions.

Narrow, because the two Louise Sullivan-type buildings on either side squeezed it in.

Dirty, because Big Dot was a slob. As TriBeCa gentrified, Big Dot refused to gentrify with it.

Dark, because, as Big Dot put it with a wheelbarrow full of common sense, “People can’t see the dirt.”

To which Freeman now barely remembered replying in that half-forgotten exchange, “You mean dark because if they saw themselves in that sooty thing you call a mirror, they’d quit drinking and you’d be out of business.”

But he—he liked the place. He was comfortable here. And he was a little dark and dirty himself, sometimes.

He knew it wasn’t really having the in-laws here for Christmas that bothered him, annoyed him, made him drink more than he should. And it wasn’t Angie. As the cheapie romance novels put it, whatever flame they’d kindled had flickered out long, long ago. It wasn’t as if both of them had stopped working on it. He wondered if they’d ever really *started*—when they first married. Funny how you roll over in bed one morning and wonder, *Who the hell is that person?* Now, well, it didn’t matter anymore.

No, it wasn’t Angie—there was something else bothering him, bothering him real bad.

Chapter 5

Trinity Church was almost full and Parkhurst, followed by the choir, cross bearer, flag bearers, candle bearers, subordinate priests and attendants, had made his way up the side aisle to the rear of the church. Quigley was waiting for him.

Edward Quigley was a big man by Parkhurst's estimation. He was a Fifth Avenue lawyer, partner in a distinguished firm, a Yale graduate, just the right height over six feet, still blond though in his late forties, handsome and dressed impeccably in a conservatively cut three-piece blue pin-striped suit. And he was so angry Parkhurst thought saliva would begin drooling any minute between his scarcely hidden clenched teeth.

"Could I speak to you for just a moment, Emory?" Quigley asked in a voice heavy with forced friendliness, which was for the ears of the others who were busily fussing over their vestments in anticipation of the procession.

"Certainly."

Parkhurst stepped with Quigley away from the others behind one of the high columns nearby. Quigley drew close.

"*Do you know what's going on out there?*" Quigley said with undisguised fury, though in a low voice.

"Richard Whitney came and told me earlier," Parkhurst said stochically. His arms were folded across his chest, his hands clutching the *Book of Common Prayer*.

"Why haven't you been out there *doing* something about it, then?" Quigley demanded, his eyes incredulous.

"I haven't spoken to my daughter—or she hasn't spoken to *me*—in years. You're well aware of that," Parkhurst said, exhaustion creeping into his voice. He had to focus, forget Quigley and maintain his energy for the ceremony ahead.

“That’s one thing,” said Quigley, not about to be put off, “but she never showed up on our doorstep before—and especially *now*—Christmas Eve, for God’s sake. The whole church is talking.”

“I could tell that as I came up,” Parkhurst said in a low, depressed voice, almost to himself.

“Well, what the hell is she doing *here, tonight?*”

“I haven’t looked outside, but Richard tells me they’re carrying signs stipulating their reasons.”

“Yes, I’ve been watching!”

“Then you know why they’re here,” Parkhurst said, a gentle testiness creeping into his voice, careful not to allow himself to become angry.

“But there are a *hundred* other churches in New York.”

“Not where I’m rector.”

“It’s the God damn *publicity*, and you know it!” Quigley said in a rush. “*She’s your daughter!* This’ll make the late news!”

“No doubt,” Parkhurst said wearily. “It will all pass. Try to remain calm. She’s just taking advantage of our relationship, you know that. This will pass.”

“*No, it won’t!*” Quigley shouted, stomping his foot like a preschooler, immediately realizing he was getting too loud, losing it. He lowered his voice. “The least you can do it go out there and *talk* to the bitch!”

Parkhurst said nothing, but sighed and walked toward the entrance, Quigley right behind him. They ran right into the mayor of New York, Frederick A. Lindstadt, entering with his wife and some aides. He was not smiling when he reached out and shook their hands. Parkhurst’s expression became appropriately grave. Quigley put on a weak smile that came off more like a dunce’s simper.

“This is terrible for the church,” said the mayor. “I’m just sorry it’s your daughter, Em.”

“No more than I myself, Mr. Mayor.”

“Are you going to do something?”

“I’m going to *try*.”

The inside ushers were ready to seat the mayor and his party. Lindstadt nodded and followed the ushers down the main aisle.

Parkhurst walked out to the portals and surveyed the scene, the two head ushers in their dark suits with white carnations in their lapels respectfully standing aside for him, his vestments flowing gloriously behind him in the freezing winter wind. Still clutching his worn *Book of Common Prayer*, he walked down the steps toward the shifting knot of protesters, spotting his daughter in the middle as soon as he drew close.

The police gathered around him without a word as he walked up to the mob and towards his daughter. Threats and screams thundered down on him. The wind was in his ear. He could no longer hear the considerably loud organ music playing inside, readying the congregation for the processional. Janie, an attractive woman from any perspective, had seen him coming and begun a chant (quickly picked up by the crowd), which now drowned out the wind.

“Or-dain more les-bi-ans! Or-dain more les-bi-ans!”

“Janie!” he called out. *“Janie! Listen to me!”*

The chant went on. Parkhurst drew closer to Janie and the police moved closer around him. Parkhurst was genuinely stunned by the force of emotion running through the women. He woke out of his momentary daze and broke through two policemen separating him from his daughter and took her strongly by the arm.

“Janie! Why are you doing this to me? You’re ruining me!” he screamed, the passion and anger in him finally exploding.

“It doesn’t matter!” she screamed back over the roar, not wanting to listen to anything he had to say, consumed by the emotion she’d worked up in her supporters. *“It doesn’t matter!”* she yelled again. *“Or-dain more les-bi-ans!”* she yelled, picking up the rhythm with the others. They were all laughing at him—pointing, laughing, having the time of their lives.

Parkhurst was trembling with fury. He still held her arm, though she was trying to wrestle away from his grip, which only tightened. He

raised his other arm, still clutching the *Book of Common Prayer*, and was about to bring it down on his cowering daughter when Sergeant Mike Harris grabbed his arm and pulled it down.

“You don’t wanna be doin’ that, sir.”

Parkhurst looked at the man, and didn’t even focus on his face. But slowly his sight returned. He came out of his daze, ashamed now of what he’d been about to do, and allowed the officers to back him away from the lunging mob of militant women. The police now had him by both arms, as if they were taking *him* away, instead of the women. He shook them off and turned to face them.

“Thank you, gentlemen. I hope you’ll be able to contain these hoodlums and allow us to worship in peace.”

“We’ll handle ’em, sir,” Harris said with a shrug. “I wish there was something we could do, but they have a permit.”

Parkhurst composed himself and walked up the stone steps to the great bronze doors. Quigley was waiting. Parkhurst spoke, but did not look at him.

“There’s nothing to be done about it,” he said abruptly. “They have a permit. What time is it, Father Whitney?” he asked, turning away from Quigley.

“Five past, Father Parkhurst.”

“We begin promptly in ten minutes, then.” Parkhurst looked out on the sea of strident women outside. “It’s not as if we don’t have enough gay people in the clergy, is it?” he asked no one in particular, and then, looking up, caught Whitney looking right at him.

“I didn’t mean it that way, Richard.”

“I know, Father,” said Whitney with an indulgent smile.

Parkhurst looked out over the congregation. Crowded into Trinity were some one thousand worshippers this Christmas Eve. Members were investment bankers from the best houses, important lawyers, judges, physicians, prominent educators, society people mainly, and many with money so old no one knew how far back it went.

The church where George Washington worshipped. Parkhurst's for one more night.

The oldest church in New York.

And, as anybody in the Episcopal Diocese of New York could tell you, the richest.

Chapter 6

Charlie Kolsnar was just turning the corner of Wall Street onto Broadway looking out for a taxi. He saw he'd have to walk a couple of blocks uptown to find a free one. The wind hit him like a quick left-right combination punch. Some dyke demonstrators were blocking traffic, causing the bottleneck. The noise was terrific. Police whistles blew. Lights atop squad cars whirled rhythmically. But all Kolsnar could think of were the bonds, the easy Eurotrash girls populating Punta del Este this time of year (where it was summer) and the warm salubrious breezes of Aqua Dulces.

So it was entirely understandable that he didn't notice Randolph Gerard, president of his firm, getting out of his limousine with his wife about twenty feet ahead of him.

"Charlie!"

Kolsnar heard his name and froze. Now he saw Gerard. His heart sank. Gerard, a portly man in his late sixties, came rushing up to him. He had thinning white hair and small bags under his eyes.

"Charlie! Good to see you!" he smiled. "You haven't been in the office tonight, have you, man?"

"Hello, Mrs. Gerard. Yes, I had some pretty important work to do."

Damn!

"Ginny, look, it's Charlie," Gerald said, turning to his wife.

"Merry Christmas, Mrs. Gerard."

Bitch! He'd always hated her. She was the meddlesome kind of society woman and a royal pain in the ass who always asked you to the kind of parties you couldn't refuse to attend.

"Fine, Charlie. And you?"

"Just great, ma'am, thanks," Kolsnar said with a ready smile.

Ginny Gerard had always thought Charlie Kolsnar was one of the handsomest men she'd ever seen. He was young, just thirty-five, and had one of those "male model" bodies you saw on every street in New

York. A dazzling smile, perfect white teeth, a finely shaped nose. Black hair. Bedroom blue eyes. He wore clothes beautifully. They just seemed to hang off his taut, lean torso. A couple of years ago at a pool party at their house in Southampton, she'd seen him in his swim trunks, and he looked just absolutely fine. He had salt and pepper hair at the temples, prematurely, and this made him even more attractive. His wife, Loretta, was a bit of a stiff, and one could tell she was a bit uncomfortable in the rarefied atmosphere of excess that the Hamptons had become the last twenty years. She knew Loretta came from money. Her father was big in agriculture upstate. And one could tell she wanted it all—the “society” part of it all—but she wasn't really at her ease when she found herself immersed in it.

One could always tell.

Her husband was blathering on.

“Ginny, this man works the longest, oddest hours of anybody in the firm. He could tell you stories about the bond market that would curl your toes. By the way, Charlie, we're late for church,” Gerard said, glancing toward Trinity across the street and down half a block.

“Don't let me keep you, sir.” *Unless you want to hear a story about bonds that will really curl your toes*, he thought with a silent laugh.

“Damn crowd of punks! Look at 'em—jamming the streets. Disgusting!”

“I'll let you make your way in,” Kolsnar said. “You don't want to be late.

And neither do I!

“Walk over with us, Charlie. I want to ask your opinion on the Harmes estate.”

Gerard slipped an arm through Kolsnar's and his other arm through his wife's, and led them both across the street as he rattled on about the Harmes estate.

Fuck this shit! Kolsnar thought, but he saw little choice but to go along. He had plenty of time.

They made their way through the barricades and up the steps. Parkhurst was standing just inside greeting the last few parishioners to arrive.

“Hello, Randy,” said the rector with a thin but genuinely friendly smile.

“Hello, Em. Nasty business out there,” Gerard said, jerking his head over his shoulder. “What’s it all about?”

“I’m not sure, Randy. Ginny, Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Em,” said Ginny.

“I suggest you go on in. We’re about to begin.”

“Thanks, Em.” They moved on.

“I’d better leave now,” said Kolsnar, trying to get his arm away from Gerard, who still had a fatherly, *and firm*, hold on him. To Kolsnar, it felt like a vice grip.

“Have you ever sat through a service in this church, Charlie?”

“No, sir, I...”

... *don’t really want to!*

“Well, it’s high time you did! This won’t take all that long. Forty minutes. And this is the prettiest service of the whole year, isn’t it, Ginny?”

“Only time I can get him in here,” said Ginny Gerard. “You’ll really enjoy it, Charlie.”

Right, lady!

Kolsnar had his mouth open to say something about getting home to put a bike together for his oldest son, but both Gerards pulled him abruptly down the aisle.

“I really have to go,” he bleated finally.

“It can wait, Charlie,” Gerard said forcefully. “*It’s Christmas Eve!*”

“But my family...”

“Charlie, you’re working at midnight on Christmas Eve, for Christ’s sake. They can wait a few minutes longer. The kids’ll be asleep, anyway.”

“But...”

“You can slip out in a few minutes if you like, Charlie. Just stay for the processional,” Ginny urged. “It’s really special.”

“Well, for the processional, all right, but then I really have to go.”

Fucking bitch!

“We understand, Charlie,” said Gewrard.

Exactly one minute after they were seated near the rear of the church, the organ played the introduction to *O Come All Ye Faithful* and the whole packed room rose as one to sing out. Kolsnar placed his briefcase beside him and picked up a hymnal. He couldn’t believe it. Well, he’d stay for the processional and slip out a few minutes after the service began. He still had plenty of time—three hours to catch the plane in Jersey, and the pilots wouldn’t exactly leave without their only passenger. He was cool. For what he was getting, he could afford to be polite to the old man from whose firm he was stealing \$200 million dollars. Give or take.

Parkhurst stood aside while the choir filed slowly down the center aisle leading the congregation in song. The processional, steeped in ritual, always made Parkhurst feel a little better.

*... joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem ...*

Parkhurst brought up the end of the column. As those participating in the processional moved down the aisle in a stately fashion, clearing the rear of the church, the head ushers closed the inner glass doors separating the narthex from the nave. There were still a few empty seats in the last two pews. The great bronze doors—with one panel depicting George Washington entering the church to worship—would be gently pushed shut when the last pews were filled with stragglers.

Ah, thought Parkhurst, finally feeling a sense of peace coming over him, *now we can begin*.

Chapter 7

Just about the time Parkhurst started down Trinity's long center aisle, a man dressed in a dark suit got out of the rear door of the paneled van. He glanced quickly around him and, seeing no one, walked over to the door, inserted a key, opened it, and walked in, careful to adjust the white carnation in his lapel. A few seconds later, another man left the van and followed him into the church. He was dressed in a free-flowing full-length monk's cassock with the hood pulled down over his face.

The man in the dark suit made his way deftly along a labyrinthine corridor in the bowels of the church until he came to a spiral stone staircase leading up to the main chamber, just to the side of the sanctuary. Light filtered down the stairwell and the sound of a thousand voices raised in song was clear and strong. By now his companion in the monk's robe had come up behind him and suddenly gave him a sharp nudge in the back. The man in the dark suit looked over his shoulder at the monk, but the hood completely obscured the man's face. He turned and started up the staircase. The hooded man waited thirty seconds before following him.

The man in the dark suit, whose name was Jimmy Simon, found himself in short order at the top of the staircase to the side of the sanctuary. Thirty feet away, directly in front of him, was an aisle that led beside the pews all the way to the front of the church. It was as bare as an airport runway, narrow, separated from the pews by a long row of huge columns holding up the structure. Between each of the massive columns was thick and intricately carved latticework installed in the Nineteenth Century. The latticework rose a full seven feet between each column. He could thus walk along the aisle almost entirely unnoticed by the congregation—except for the thirty-foot distance between where he was now and the first column.

Jimmy Simon took a deep breath and started walking, carefully, but as nonchalantly as he could, watching the congregation out of the cor-

ner of his eye as he moved. He saw only one person look his way, but he'd been told beforehand he'd cause no excitement. He was dressed exactly like a head usher. Everyone was busy looking at the processional down the center aisle, watching for the cross. As the cross came to each pew, the worshippers briefly dipped their heads in respect, as was the custom.

The aisle was dark behind the heavily varnished latticework, and as Simon walked with an even, unhurried gait toward the entrance, his eyes uncontrollably shifted toward the congregation, the members of which he could see in quick snatches through the thick pattern of oak leaves into which the latticework had been fashioned. The light from the main chamber crept through the wooden oak leaves, creating thousands of small shadows that passed methodically over Simon's face as he moved steadily down the long aisle. He suddenly realized he'd been humming the hymn and pacing his stride to the music.

When he reached the last column, he turned around and saw the monk about halfway down the aisle behind him, heading his way.

Perfect!

The monk had caused no ripple of attention, either. Their leader, Manny Branch, had told them that while people would think it unusual to see monks in Trinity Church, if they noticed them at all, they would be too busy singing to think consciously how unconventional it really was.

So far, so good!

That Manny Branch was a genius!

At this moment outside the church, six other men led by Manny Branch and garbed in the same manner as the first monk, got out of the rear of the black van and dashed into the church, scurrying through the door in a rush.

The last to go through was Ernie Domasky. He'd taken off one of his soft gloves so he could take the wrapper off a piece of mint-flavored chewing gum he'd been tangling with, and had been putting the glove back on as he got out of the van. His hands were stiff with the cold; he fumbled and dropped the glove, but in the rush left it behind.

The hell with it! You can buy those gloves in any hardware store in America.

Manny Branch led his six men (another remained in the van) to the bottom of the stairwell.

And waited.

* * *

Meanwhile, Jimmy Simon reached under his coat and felt for his gun. He knew it was secure because he could feel it pressing lightly into his back, held by the waistband, but he felt better just touching the butt. Simon had a haircut for the occasion. He felt clean and refreshed after a bath three hours ago, but he was very tense and sweated heavily. The monk was beside him now. Simon looked at his wristwatch and gave a silent thumbs-up to his partner. Then he left the cover of the lattice-work and stood for a moment behind the backs of the whole congregation. He saw the priest was just now mounting the few steps to the sanctuary. The last verse of the hymn was being sung.

Everything was going perfectly.

He moved quickly—but quietly—through the inner glass doors. In the narthex, just a few feet from the great bronze doors that led outside, he could hear the chanting and yelling of the protesters out front—an element they hadn't counted on. The two head ushers were admitting a man and his wife. Simon stood aside and offered them a discreet bow from the neck. He looked out towards the bronze doors. One of the ushers was looking at him with a puzzled expression.

Simon quickly walked up to him. There was no time to waste. If he was going to be the one to fuck up everything, he wanted to get it over with fast.

“I don’t believe I know you, sir,” said one of the ushers with mild concern. The other usher walked over. There was no one on the steps behind them.

“Mr. Parkhurst asked me to tell you something, but these people out here...,” he said, raising his voice and pointing to the demonstrators.

“Let’s step inside,” said the second usher.

Simon backed into the narthex and over to the side away from the open bronze doors, reached behind him and pulled out his gun.

“*Not a word,*” he said quickly, pushing them against the wall, pressing his gun into the first usher’s side, staying close. “Take it easy, don’t get excited, and do what I tell you.” He looked over his shoulder toward the glass doors. “Go through those doors and take a left. I’m right behind you. *Not a word, now!*”

The shocked expressions on the ushers’ faces froze there, but they moved ahead, going to the inner doors, unable to keep from looking over their shoulders at Simon.

“*Go, on! Go on! Hurry it up!*” Simon urged them in a hard, tense whisper and in an accent that made both ushers think the man was from the Bronx.

The three of them passed through the inner doors and walked left. The two ushers found themselves being pushed around the corner of the first column right into the muzzle of a MAC-10 machine pistol stuck into their faces by the monk. As they opened their mouths in a natural reaction of horror, Simon and the monk stuck handkerchiefs in their mouths. The monk pushed them up against the column, holding the ushers’ necks with one huge beefy hand, the end of his weapon pointing up their noses. He could feel the men, one in his early fifties, the other in his late sixties, trembling like children. The older man almost fainted, but the monk held him up.

Simon casually walked back through the inner glass doors, out to the top step and gently pushed the heavy bronze doors closed, remaining outside to prevent anyone from entering.

As Parkhurst mounted the last step into the sanctuary and turned, he looked down the center aisle and saw an usher go out through the inner doors. He continued to sing the hymn as he watched three ushers come back through the doors and go behind the concealing lattice-work. But the hymn was over and it was time to begin with the Collect:

“Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desire known, and from whom no secrets are hidden; cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy Holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The congregation joined to say: “Amen.”

Manny Branch waited with his men in the shadows below the spiral staircase.

“The Epistle is written in the second chapter of Titus, beginning at the eleventh verse: ‘The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying the ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us all from iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works. These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no man despise thee.’” Parkhurst looked up and said: “Here ended the Epistle!”

The organ immediately struck up the introduction to *O Little Town of Bethlehem* and the congregation rose with their hymnals.

Far down the center aisle near the back of the church, Kolsnar whispered to Gerard.

“I think I’ll slip out now.”

“Oh, Charlie, stay for just one more hymn,” Ginny Gerard begged him in a pleading whisper.

He smiled a dazzling smile, while thinking he wanted to bite the bitch’s fucking head off and watch the blood spurt from her wrinkled neck.

“One more hymn,” he winked playfully.

She smiled back radiantly. He was *so* handsome, Charlie was.

* * *

As the congregation began to sing, Manny Branch motioned to his followers with a flick of his wrist. They moved like a sinister coil up the spiral staircase.

Once they reached the top, Manny Branch and Louis Pate moved to the side of the sanctuary behind the choir, concealed by an ornate carved wooden screen that rose dramatically in front of them. Through an opening in this screen Branch could see Parkhurst and Whitney, and the two other ministers participating in the ceremony. Parkhurst remained standing in the center of the sanctuary, occasionally taking a step this way or that. The others were standing above their seats. The choir was divided, half on either side of the sanctuary.

Marcus Riley made his way around the back of the sanctuary to cover the other side.

Ben Scaglione was already in place at the far end of the church watching the two ushers. Next to him was the staircase leading up to the loft where the organist played on.

Ernie Domasky went down the aisle to guard the ushers while Scaglione moved up the stairs to the loft. Domasky stayed at the bottom and waited until he could see Luis Amagno opposite him across the church.

Amagno had followed Marcus Riley around the sanctuary and had moved up the other aisle concealed by latticework.

Nick Ritter stood between Branch and the spiral staircase, ready to block anyone who might try to escape through the opening between the side aisles and the sanctuary.

All were wearing monks' robes. All kept out of sight. All kept their hoods far down over their heads, completely concealing their faces. All carried powerful MAC-10 machine pistols hidden up their roomy sleeves. All were waiting for Branch to make the first move. And all in the meantime listened to the hymn.

And sweated.

O Little town of Bethlehem!

How still we see thee lie!

Above thy deep and dreamless sleep

The silent stars go by;

Yet in thy dark streets shineth

The everlasting Light;

The hopes and fears of all the years

Are met in thee tonight.

At this point Manny Branch pulled the hood off his head and walked through an opening in the carved screen into the strong flood-lights bathing the sanctuary in a full bright light. His men were in place. It was time to begin. He slipped the safety catch off under his sleeve.

The congregation had moved into the second verse. Those who looked up first saw a man in a monk's robe who seemed to appear from nowhere. He was walking directly toward Father Parkhurst, slowly, gracefully, peacefully. Parkhurst faced the congregation, and did not

notice him at first. He rocked back and forth to the music, lost in the hymn, swaying ever so slightly from the knees, as was his habit. He had a sentimental weakness for this hymn, and chose it specially for this occasion.

More and more people looked up and more and more people stopped singing when they got a better look at the monk. Parkhurst noticed something and looked into the congregation. Seeing their eyes fixed to his right, he turned and looked at the monk—no, it looked like Jesus Christ himself—coming towards him.

The monk wore a plastic mask of the face of Jesus Christ, the face that showed him looking like a hippie, the dime-store version of him with long flowing brown hair and an expression of beatific peace for all. He walked carefully, directly, his arms not moving at all, but held rigidly to his sides, no emotion coming through the serene mask over his face.

Parkhurst froze.

Members of the choir, Whitney and the other attendants didn't know what to do when they saw Jesus Christ in their midst because they didn't know what to think. It confused some of the choir so thoroughly that they kept singing about Bethlehem.

Parkhurst's expression was unreadable. He just stood there looking at the man walk with frightening premeditation toward him. The singing continued fitfully, but it was rapidly on its way to dying away completely.

Manny Branch walked up to Parkhurst, whipped out his weapon and brought it quickly to the minister's right temple, holding it in both hands. "Lift your arms up high, Mr. Parkhurst," Branch said calmly to the priest.

Parkhurst raised both of his arms toward heaven, still holding in one of them his *Book of Common Prayer*. He said nothing.

The singing stopped at once and alarm spread through the congregation more rapidly than the angel of death moved over Egypt.

But before anyone could move or had what was a brief opportunity to leave his pew for the open aisles, the other monks, hoods back and identically masked, jumped into position to hold everyone in place. Domasky appeared at the rear of the church holding his weapon on the crowd. Ben Scaglione aimed his machine pistol at the organist in the gallery, and stood on the rail for all to see. Nick Ritter and Marcus Riley appeared at the gaps on either side of the sanctuary. The high wooden latticework between the pillars along the whole length of the church on both sides prevented anyone from moving to the sides. Louis Pate appeared directly behind Branch in the sanctuary, his MAC-10 trained on the choir and attendants. The congregation was boxed in tightly within five seconds of the appearance of Branch's weapon.

There was a tense moment as this tableau held, but in a moment women began to scream and men's voices raised an indignant protest. People started yelling, calling out, but the monks kept everyone in place. No one moved, no one knew what to do against such weapons.

In the sanctuary, Louis Pate moved over to the other side of Parkhurst and put his machine gun to the priest's head. Branch lowered his gun and moved toward the congregation. He held his hands up for silence, but no one would pay any attention to him and the shouting continued.

"Come down here," Branch said, turning to Parkhurst. "Talk to them, get 'em quiet."

Parkhurst walked down.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"Get 'em quiet or you'll have big trouble, mister," was all Branch said to him.

Parkhurst held his arms high.

"Brethren—ladies and gentlemen—*please be quiet!*" Parkhurst had to yell at the top of his lungs to be heard. "Please! Be silent *immediately!*" He began drawing their attention. "*Listen to me!*" Parkhurst called out.

Slowly order began to return and people looked up to Parkhurst for guidance. No one knew what was going on, but everyone could see they were all in some kind of great danger. A mild form of hysteria seized the congregation, but surprisingly, it did not develop into panic. One vastly overweight woman in the seventeenth pew looked around desperately, clutched her breast, screamed like a train whistling its arrival into a station, and fainted, sinking like the *Titanic*, stunned at first by her own weakness, hesitating grandly and trying unsuccessfully to recoil, and finally collapsing as speedily as a model boat caught by an untimely powerful ripple on Central Park Lake. The men around her tried to revive her and made room in the pew for her to lie down. Someone collected a couple of thick red velvet cushions to support her head.

“Look around,” Branch urged Parkhurst, who quickly saw they were all trapped.

“*Listen to this man!*” Parkhurst said. “The church is under their control. Do not try anything foolish, please! *I beg you!*”

Louis Pate still had his weapon at Parkhurst’s head. The rector moved back with a glance to Branch, still holding his hands high above his head. Finally, he got a measure of quiet, or about as much of it as he could reasonably expect to get from a thousand people scared out of their skins. Branch spoke to the people in a voice full of calmness, successfully designed to frighten them into accepting their situation.

“Listen to me very carefully,” he began, noting the huddling groups of parishioners and dozens of whispering twosomes. He couldn’t stop all the chatter.

“The church has been sealed off. We have a man outside who is dressed like an usher. Your ushers are here,” he pointed down the center aisle. Domasky pushed the two real ushers halfway down the aisle and left them there, looking around embarrassed, as if people were staring at their nakedness, or as if this were the Coliseum and the lions were due any minute. Both ushers kept wanting to tell everybody that all this wasn’t *their* fault. They looked as if they thought people would start

casting stones any minute. But of course they said nothing, finally edging their way toward a pew and squeezing in among the others, as if by melting into the congregation they could avoid some prearranged fate, or at least not suffer any worse than the other sheep in the flock.

“We are here to rob the church, or more exactly, you. We are not, I repeat, *not*, terrorists. We only want your money and your jewelry. We are staying here until the job is done and as long as it takes us to gather your personal belongings. There’s no point in resisting. You’ll only drag this thing out, and nobody wants that.”

Branch turned around to Parkhurst, who was starting to sweat heavily under the strain and the hot lights pouring into the sanctuary.

“And don’t forget about your Mr. Parkhurst. If there’s any serious trouble here, he’ll be the first to get it. I don’t want to see the color of his brains any more than you do, so he’s in your fucking hands, okay?”

Frederick Lindstadt was blind with outrage. He could just see the papers tomorrow morning. And two days ago he had publicly cited the entire NYPD for consistently high performance during his administration. Tinged with the public outrage at the robbery, he knew people would sneer that he had got caught with his pants down, and they’d laugh.

Mayor Lindstadt, five-seven, with the only hair on his head a well-kept fringe around his ears meeting at the base of his skull, barely circling his shiny crown, with his eyes a little “too far apart,” according to *Women’s Wear Daily*, had reason for hating it when people laughed at him.

But, like everyone else in the church, he didn’t see anything he could at the moment to stop what was happening.

Quigley was aghast, but all he could wonder at this moment was how this latest insult to the church would affect its public relations. Though he knew he had no reason for suspecting it, and felt petty for thinking it, he couldn't help but feel Parkhurst and the problems he had caused the church were somehow responsible for this. He was more furious with Parkhurst—God knows why, he thought—than he was with the robbers.

Ten-year-old Johnny Barkett, on the other hand, about twenty pews back, was enthralled with the excitement the robbery created. He hoped the robbery took all night. *Wait until they hear about this at school!*

But the look on Charles Kolsnar's face had to be the most interesting of all. He simply shook his head in utter, consummate disbelief.

What the fuck am I going to do now? Shit! Of all the God damned churches in Christendom, they have to pick this one on this night. I am so fucked!

"I don't understand why they're doing this," Mrs. Gerard said in a cloud, turning to Kolsnar for an explanation.

Kolsnar just looked at her and saw a stupid fucking asshole bitch.

"Clear as day to me, lady," he said, making no effort to be polite.

"But why would they seize the *church*?" she cried hysterically.

"*Thieves!*" was Gerard's single outraged comment.

"Because ... well," Kolsnar said, taking Ginny's hand and showing her a heavy multi-carat diamond on her finger. He glanced up at the congregation and nodded. "Take a look for yourself. How many of *these* do you think are in this fucking church tonight? A God damn shit-load!"

“Let’s try to maintain some dignity, Charles,” Gerard ordered pompously.

Kolsnar waved him away as if he were a some punk who was not to be bothered with when something really serious was up.

“Oh, listen, just fuck off.”

“Wha—?”

“Just shut up,” Kolsnar said in a slow and deadly whisper, his eyes intense and focused, which had the desired effect.

Gerard told himself to remember this insolence when they were past this ordeal.

Kolsnar had more serious things on his mind than the two Gerards. He ignored their prattle the next few minutes and examined the building with a professional eye. The latticework at the end of each pew stretching almost the whole length of the church neatly prevented any escape to the sides. Even if he could get to the end of the pew by crawling on his hands and knees, once there he would have had to go either to the front of the church or to the rear. There were machine pistols down front, one overlooking him in the gallery, and sealed bronze doors about two feet thick at the rear. His eyes noted the placement of the robbers.

Perfect.

He wouldn’t get far if he tried anything. He looked at the whole picture—and saw not a single weakness in the setup. He also appreciated the irony of there being two dozen cops controlling a demonstration on the other side of those bronze doors without the faintest clue what was transpiring here inside!

Beautiful!

In a way, he had to hand it to the man who organized this thing. Somebody did a super job. Left nothing to chance. Nothing overlooked. He and his gang would get away with plenty. The diamonds alone on a crowd like this would fetch a pretty penny on any black market anywhere. And unless he could figure a way out for himself and

his Peal & Co. briefcase, they would get away with \$200 million bucks more than they'd counted on.

Talk about icing on the cake!

Kolsnar saw at once his only advantages. He had two of them: (a) his gun, which he always carried; and (b) the surprise element his having a gun gave him, for no one connected with the robbery would ever imagine one of this ritzy crowd coming to church packing iron. Since he was near the back of the church near the sealed bronze doors, there might be an opportunity to make a dash for it. The lone monk between him and the doors would not be expecting him to come out of his pew firing his gun. The only question was how fast the monk above in the organ loft would react, spraying him with automatic fire from that very nasty MAC-10 in his grip.

He saw his only choice was to play it by ear and wait.

"This is how we'll do it," Branch was saying. "You'll be told when to file down the aisle, just like you were coming down to get Communion. Here at the rail you'll hand over your valuables. And I want them *all*," he emphasized with a finger pointed in warning.

He sighed and continued.

"Let me tell you *now* not to try to hide anything in the pews, under the pews, or anywhere else. As you move out, one of us will move in and search behind you. We'll find whatever you're hiding, don't worry."

Ernie Domasky nodded. He would search the pews.

"I want you to look above and behind you"

Everyone did, and loud whispering began as they saw Scaglione perched in the gallery.

"We are serious. We mean business, we're not afraid to kill any of you, so the more you cooperate, the better it will be for all of us and the faster it'll all be over. Believe me, I wouldn't be here if I knew there was

anything you could do to stop us. You can't, so accept it and let's get it over with."

He turned to Parkhurst.

"Do you want to say something?"

Parkhurst moved forward, eyeing Branch with astonished, pained disgust.

"I have never seen greater disrespect for anything in my life," he said evenly, looking at Branch's eyes showing through the mask. They were blue, like his, but colder. "It's sacrilege of the highest order."

Branch was impatient.

"What I meant was, do you want to say anything to *them*?" he nodded toward the congregation. "Don't talk to me. Save it for the reporters and the cops later on."

Parkhurst looked to his people.

"I see no choice," he said in a loud voice full of resonance and a fine timbre, "but to cooperate with these men to the fullest degree." The worshipers were hanging on his words. "I urge you all to remain in your places and to do precisely as you are instructed."

"Okay. Let's get started." Branch added.

Domasky and Amagno in the center aisle began at the front of the church, one pew at a time. As each pew emptied and the people were sent down to the rail, Domasky, his weapon shoulder holstered over his robe, moved into the pew and searched it thoroughly. The people filed in an orderly fashion down one side of the aisle, guarded by Amagno, and returned up the other side. Louis Pate continued to hold his MAC-10 to Parkhurst's head as an example to everyone else who could clearly see he was at the robber's mercy. Marcus Riley moved away from the gap he had been covering and helped Branch collect valuables. Nick Ritter brought out bags to hold the loot. He would ferry the stuff to the van out back.

As the people came down, Branch and Riley frisked every third or fourth person after they first dropped their belongings into a bag. But they couldn't frisk everybody. That would take too much time.

About seventy people had given over their belongings without too much trouble and returned to their pews when one woman came up not wearing her engagement ring or even a fake.

"Where is it, lady?" Branch demanded roughly.

"I didn't bring it tonight. I never do when I go out in public."

"You're tanned. Where've you been?" Branch smiled, though she couldn't see his smile behind the mask.

"Aruba," she replied, her tense mood lightening a little.

"I always wanted to go there," said Riley with a laugh.

"Shut the fuck up," Branch snapped. He grabbed the woman's hand and showed her the circle of white skin around her ring finger.

"Let me have it!"

She fumbled between her ample breasts and dug out a beautiful emerald-shaped diamond ring and dropped it into the bag.

"I'm certain it's insured," Branch said with mock-sympathy. "Now move on. I haven't got all night."

Chapter 8

Sergeant John McTaggart, Homicide, watched as the people in the white jackets slid the gurney holding the corpse of Bobby Dakers into the ambulance before driving off to the morgue, sirens blaring. He said a few words to the other cops on the scene, went back to his unmarked car and got in.

He was under the Brooklyn Bridge on the Manhattan side, and the water could be heard lapping noisily against the cruddy sea wall encrusted with slime and barnacles. Dakers's body had been found earlier by a patrol car on its normal beat.

Simple enough: a spotlight scanning routinely through the impossible darkness created by the bridge's ancient pilings and other supporting structures. A cop who thought he saw something but wasn't sure. Backing up to check it out again. Finding the right place. Throwing the spot into the blackness again. Finding the bulge against some brickwork that didn't quite look right. A bulge that was the body of one Robert George Dakers. Checking it out. Calling it in.

John McTaggart knew that his former senior partner, Detective Lieutenant Amos Freeman, had been looking for Bobby Dakers for two months, and the scent had been getting warm. Now it was cold all over again, thought McTaggart, unless Amos could sniff nothing and somehow smell a hunch—he could do that sometimes with the uncanniest results. Though McTaggart didn't work with Freeman anymore—they'd become good friends, and McTaggart had come downtown hoping to see Freeman, but nobody could locate him.

"This is Homicide two-two. Over."

"Go ahead, two-two."

"Heard anything from Freeman?"

"Still not responding, two-two. Out of his car."

"All right," said McTaggart, wearily signing off.

He knew—everybody in the Division knew—that Amos Freeman did all of his Christmas shopping—*all* of it—on Christmas Eve. His cell phone was off. So when the call came about Dakers's body, McTaggart had called the one place he thought he might find Freeman, and, not finding him there, had come down alone. But it was midnight now. Amos couldn't still be shopping. No, he would be where he hadn't been earlier—at Big Dot's Jungle Bar.

Yeah, McTaggart thought as he lit a Salem in the mustiness beneath the old bridge, *Big Dot's*. And yeah, Amos would be there, propping up the bar from the very last seat at the far end of the room, *his* stool, no one else's, even when he wasn't there. Big Dot never let anyone sit on that stool. It was Amos Freeman's, she'd say, if the offending party knew Freeman, or it was saved, somebody would be back in a minute, she'd say if the offending party did not know Freeman. And she would get very violent if someone tried to demand sitting on Freeman's personal barstool.

I'm not used to talking to you there, Big Dot would say. *I'm used to talking to Freeman there. So you move over here where I usually talk to you, or you move out the door, where I don't have to talk to you at all!*

Freeman respected Big Dot, in a peculiar way, perhaps, but respected her nonetheless.

"It's like this, y'see," Freeman would say as he gestured with a sleepy hand, rolling it from his wrist, "Big Dot's got her views on things, all kinds of things: the Democratic Party, life and death, the shape of my nose, Aretha Franklin, my stool at the end of the bar, whatever."

McTaggart was proud to have been Amos's partner.

He'd considered himself lucky a year ago when he got assigned to Freeman and his then partner for orientation after three promising years in uniform.

"Orientation," Freeman had spit that first day. "How do you 'orient' somebody?" he complained dramatically. The chief had told him Free-

man was one of the best trainers New York had, and one of the top five detectives on the force, “for an asshole.”

“What would you call it if it’s not ‘orientation,’ then?”

“You *train* somebody, you don’t orient ‘em.”

“Same thing.”

“Uh-uh,” Freeman shook his head. No.

“What’s the difference?”

Freeman had frowned, closed one eye and looked at him through the other. And took a shallow breath.

“Don’t talk to me,” was all he’d said.

McTaggart had been with them nearly three months before the three of them were up in the Bronx chasing down a lead on a fellow who’d killed three people in the robbery of a Murray Hill grocery. And when they hooked up with him in a run-down apartment house where he was visiting a piece of regular ass, Freeman’s partner was shot four times and killed in the alley behind the place after Freeman and McTaggart flushed the shooter out from the front. Freeman later caught the guy. He was doing time now. Freeman seemed to take his partner’s death stoically. He kept a little close to himself for a few days, but after that seemed normal enough.

Then the chief called him in and told him Freeman had requested him as his new partner. He had just come out of training (or orientation) at the time. But the chief said if he didn’t give Freeman his way, Freeman would make his life a living hell for months. So that was that.

“Why’d you want *me*?” McTaggart asked him later.

“I don’t want to get saddled with a loser, see?”

“No, really.”

“Really.”

McTaggart had looked at him, demanding more.

“Well, crazy brains, fuck if I know. I figured if the soup ever got too thick, you’d be stupid enough to get in front of me if a little lead was coming my way. Thoughtful. Aren’t I?”

“What’s the real reason?”

Freeman got up and put a hand on his shoulder, looking at him seriously.

“I’m in love with you.”

They’d had a good laugh ever since whenever McTaggart reminded him of that day.

They were good friends by now, and Freeman knew McTaggart inside out—just like a good detective. Freeman was friendly with his wife, Patricia, and their two boys. McTaggart couldn’t say the same about knowing Freeman, though. Freeman had a wife, Angie, and the marriage half-worked, McTaggart assumed, but he didn’t feel as close to the Freemans as Amos felt to the McTaggarts, he knew that much. Amos always got the boys presents. Angie was a quiet woman, distant in her own way as Amos was in his. She was a senior flight attendant for American Airlines at Kennedy. So she traveled a lot. They seemed to live entirely separate lives. They had no kids, so that didn’t get in the way. Maybe that was their problem, McTaggart mused—they each had such separate lives that they’d left behind whatever common ground they used to have and now had less and less to share or build upon. He knew something was wrong with Freeman beyond a “marriage gone stale” routine. It happened to a lot of marriages when the man was a cop, especially a *good* cop like Freeman. He noticed Freeman had been drinking more lately. He’d heard the talk about how Freeman had conquered a bad drinking problem in the past, but now it was coming back. He didn’t know what was nagging at Freeman, eating away at him, but John knew he’d be a better detective when he got to the bottom of it.

McTaggart found himself thinking—hoping, that is—that he and Patricia never got that way. He was glad he had two kids. And he could tell—when he saw Freeman with them—that Freeman knew he was missing something. Of course, whether he admitted it to himself was

another matter entirely. Freeman was like that. Stubborn. Whatever made a Good Cop did not necessarily make a Happy Person.

There was one other thing. Freeman had a birthday coming up (and *not at all* happy about it). McTaggart was twenty-nine—“*and one half*”—Freeman never failed to add.

McTaggart smiled and lit up another Salem as he threw his car into gear and headed over to Broadway, which he planned to take to Tribeca and Dot's.

Chapter 9

Jimmy Simon was nervous out in front of the church. He couldn't help it. The protesters were becoming increasingly belligerent and the police had called up reinforcements to keep them behind the barricades.

Inside, things were moving rapidly. Domasky occasionally would find a ring, or a wallet, or credit cards, cash, a bracelet, necklace, earrings, and other items stuffed under cushions. He found \$900 in a hymnal, but only because he happened to see one C-note sticking out slightly. He didn't have time to check each prayer book and hymnal. When he found something of value, he'd take it to the aisle and give it to a member of the congregation on his way to the rail. He wished his robe had pockets.

There was a constant low rumble of whispering, murmuring, quiet worried conversation among the congregation. Branch knew the building would have the same effect as being soundproof if you considered the traffic and the protest going on outside. Too, the bronze doors were closed tightly, and the only windows to speak of were very high up and small. Still, the people were getting restless.

Domasky and Amagno occasionally had trouble getting people to leave the pews rapidly. They roughed up a few of the women and shoved them with their weapons into the aisle and this produced speedy results with the others.

But when the flow got to His Honor the mayor of New York, there was real trouble. Lindstadt adamantly refused to move.

He couldn't go without putting up *some* resistance, no matter how futile it might be. Everyone in the church was watching him, tensely waiting to see what he would do now that he'd taken the first step to resist by folding his arms. Now he firmly shook his head when Domasky

told him to move down the aisle. He was as intimidated as everyone else, but he had to think of tomorrow, and of what people would say and think about the way he acted tonight.

“Are you walking down the aisle, buddy, or you gonna get pushed down?” Domasky demanded in a hurry.

“Don’t you know who you’re talking to?” said Mrs. Lindstadt, indignation written all over her wrinkled face.

“You can’t talk to the mayor of New York like that,” said a nearby aide.

Domasky raised his weapon.

“With this, I can talk to anybody any way I like, see?” he glared at the man.

And then to the mayor: “*Move!!*”

“I’m not budging,” Lindstadt said flatly, tightening his folded arms for whatever good that would do. He was standing first in the pew right next to Domasky in the aisle.

Domasky nodded meaningfully to his partner. They could hear complaints coming from Branch and the others down front as the aisle began to clear.

“*Move!!*” Domasky roared at the top of his voice. The mayor looked straight ahead with no acknowledgment.

Domasky raised his gun in a wild gesture and brought it down in a quick arc on the mayor’s back just below the neck with a loud crack. Mrs. Lindstadt screamed.

Lindstadt gasped for air, and doubled over with the impact. Domasky took hold of a small hank of the mayor’s hair circling his bald crown and swirled him out into the aisle for all to see. The mayor looked like a child a schoolyard bully was shoving around. Domasky turned Lindstadt in a wide circle three times, still holding him by the hair. Women were screaming. The pint-sized mayor flailed his arms in a hopeless effort to release the big monk’s grip, squealing like a pig the whole time.

On one circuit, Amagno reversed his weapon and held it like a baseball bat, butt out, and slammed it into the mayor's stomach with all his strength. Domasky let go his grip and the whole congregation watched as Lindstadt slid on his ass fifteen feet down the marble aisle.

"*Now get up and walk, you son of a bitch!*" yelled Domasky, pointing his gun at Lindstadt. The mayor painfully got to his feet and looked at his friends in the congregation, none of whom had made a serious effort to help him. Lindstadt saw his wife, swallowed his pride and turned in pain toward the altar. Amagno motioned for the others in the mayor's pew to follow. Mrs. Lindstadt was sobbing now. Amagno pushed her forcefully down after her husband.

"*And think about us the next time you raise the subway fares, you cocksucker!*" Domasky couldn't resist yelling after the mayor.

Though no one had helped the mayor, many men in the congregation were furious. A few minutes later, Domasky and Amagno were emptying yet another pew, with Domasky standing beside the pew herding people out, his weapon slung over his shoulder, while Amagno stood back a bit, guarding those coming out as well as those returning from the rail. His attention wandered from one group to the other.

With no warning, one of the men who had just passed Domasky turned in a stunning whirl and grabbed at Domasky's weapon, totally surprising him. Domasky raised his arm to resist, but by so doing, gave the man enough slack to yank loose the gun and pull it off his arm. As the man pulled, however, Domasky shot a quick look over his shoulder to his partner, who was standing ready, and shoved the man off balance onto the floor before he could use the gun or get it under control.

But the gun went with him. No matter. Domasky dove for the aisle as half a dozen other men who had already left the pew jumped over him to help their friend with the weapon.

Branch saw all of this and started running down the aisle.

Amagno started shooting—he'd been waiting all night for this moment—gunning down six men in four seconds in a blaze of smoke and

sound that echoed through the church. Dozens of rounds skipped off the marble floor and flew into the congregation huddling in the pews, killing and wounding a couple of dozen more.

* * *

Outside, Jimmy Simon jumped in his skin when he heard the muffled shots. But he relaxed a little when he saw no reaction from either the police or the crowds on the street, still a good distance away from the portals.

He had been listening for the slightest irregular sound. They hadn't. And he had been able to hear the shots only barely.

Now the sounds were gone. The honking traffic, tied up by the demonstration, was getting noisier by the minute. For the moment they were still safe, but Christ, you'd think they had more sense inside than to start shooting up the God damn place. Something must have fouled up. How long would this go on?

Simon was watching the traffic and noticed the mobile unit from WNBC worming its way down Broadway. He closed his eyes to think. Just what he needed. A film crew. They were here to cover the protest, he knew, and when he thought about it a minute longer, it was funny. They would be filming a bunch of dykes getting it on in front of the church while all the time the real story of the night—of the year—was happening inside behind two heavy—and Simon now knew, almost soundproof—bronze doors.

* * *

Inside, chaos followed the shootings. Hundreds of people, forced to stand throughout the ordeal, plunged, hiding between the pews when the shooting started. Those few people still left in the aisle on their way back from the altar dropped to the floor faster than those who were killed.

Scaglione, perched in the gallery, remembered his instructions in case something like this happened, and as soon as the shooting started and the organist jumped, Scaglione was pointing his weapon at the musician.

“*Play!* Loud, too, or you’re as dead as they are!” And instantly after the shots died, the music soared up to help cover it all.

In the aisle, Manny Branch had taken over. He had his machine pistol out and ready, pointing it at two bystanders.

“You two! Pull those bodies over to the side,” he ordered in a fast voice, nodding to the dead men.

When the aisle was cleared, Branch raised his arm in a signal to Scaglione, who stopped the music.

“*Now listen to me!*” he said, trying to keep the emotion and tension out of his voice. “You saw what happened. These men didn’t do what they were told. That’s all I’m going to say.” He walked over to Domasky and spoke to him in a seething whisper: “What the fuck are you *doing*, you shithead?”

“He surprised me. What can I say?” Domasky pleaded.

Branch turned without a word and jogged down the aisle. When he got back, Parkhurst walked down to him. He was trembling with anger, fear, emotion, unable to repress any of it.

“You’ve *got* to stop. Please! *Now!*”

“Sorry,” said Branch, almost kindly. “We have to finish.”

Chapter 10

“Haven’t you finished?” Big Dot asked as she waddled toward Freeman and glanced at the bottle of Tennessee sour mash whiskey.

“Fuck off,” said Freeman, his lids too heavy even to look up.

In the near darkness, Big Dot looked closely at the bottle.

“Well, you’re sure gaining on it.”

“Fuck you.”

Indifferent.

“You drunk?”

Unimpressed.

“When I’m drunk, you’ll know it!”

Belligerent.

“You’ve been drunk before.”

Knowing.

“Not in this sinkhole!”

Triumphant.

Big Dot jabbed at the bar a couple of times with her index finger.

“Yeah—here.”

Definite.

“Well, I’m not drunk now.”

Defensive.

“Almost,” Big Dot smiled. “Hell, I remember one night you was in here—one of them times you feelin’ sorry fer yerself—”

“My analyst,” said Freeman so quietly Big Dot didn’t even hear him.

“—and you put one bottle of black Jack on the canvas and had the second one beggin’ for mercy—’bout halfway down, it was—and mister, you was *drunk!*”

“*Then* was one of the few times, you asshole.”

“*Shiiiiiiiiit,*” Big Dot drawled, cocking her head to one side. “You was blind!”

Freeman's back straightened. A certain note of pride crept uncertainly into his voice.

"When I'm looking for it, I can *always* see it. I'm a cop, remember? One of New York's finest."

"*Riiiiight*," Big Dot said with an open but friendly, maternal smile. "Blind as a bastard buzzard."

There were those *rare* occasions, Freeman admitted to himself, when each eyelash felt like a two-inch thick cable. That's when you were really drunk.

"By the way, Freeman," Big Dot's voice intruded its way into Freeman's wandering train of thought, "I been wantin' to ask you a question."

"The floor is yours, senator," answered Freeman with a bobbing head.

"How come you slipped back with the drink? You was doin' good there fer a while. Club soda with lime. *Two* wedges o' lime. An' ever now and then a Campari an' soda."

Freeman's lips twisted into a wry smile.

"Campari and soda," he said softly. "I never really liked Campari. I started drinking it at Helen's parties."

"How *is* that sister o' yours?"

"Sitting pretty up there on Park Avenue."

"Sittin' pretty on Park Av-*e-nue!*" Big Dot laughed. It was as far away from Dot's world as the moon, Park Avenue. "So tell me, what was it got you back on the Black?" Big Dot leaned toward him.

"Maybe it's none of your God damned business, Big Dot. It's good for business, right, me drinking?" Freeman replied sleepily. "What do you care *why?*"

Big Dot stood up, a little put back.

"Well, *ex-cuse* me, prince! Can't a lady be curious? I thought we was friends."

"We are friends, Dot," Freeman said a little sadly.

“Rumor has it you’re one of the best homicide cops in the city, for—”

“—for an asshole,” Freeman finished up the thought out loud with a crooked, rueful smile.

“Hey, for a *person*, not just an asshole,” Big Dot went on. “Good record. A little off the wall, sometimes, they say, but it looks like you got everything goin’ fer ya.”

“Maybe I’m miserable, Big Dot.”

“Aw, you got a good life.”

“All right, Big Dot, I’ll tell you why I’ve been comin’ in here for so long.”

“Why?”

“ ’Cause I’m waiting to sweep you off your feet and take you to Florida,” Freeman gestured wildly. “Frick and Frack. Off to the Keys!”

“Yer silly, Freeman, but I love ya anyway,” Big Dot smiled broadly. “Ya know, always wanted to take me a ride in one o’ them convertibles. Never did, though,” she added, pursing her lips and shaking her head dismissively.

“You’re too busy in here serving shit to bums.”

“Girl’s gotta make a livin’,” Big Dot said defensively.

Freeman jabbed himself in his chest with his index finger.

“This guy’s gotta *keep* living. Maybe this stuff helps me out a little. I always thought of bars as a kind of community service, ya know?”

“None of my business why the customers be here. Especially good ones like you that’s been comin’ in fer so long.”

Freeman nodded with a smile and fired up a Winston.

“No smokin’ in the bar, Freeman,” said Big Dot nonchalantly as she wiped water beads off a glass absent-mindedly.

“So call the cops.”

They performed this charade every time Freeman lit up.

“Liquor *can* be enjoyable in moderation, Freeman, you know that?”

“Oh, I enjoy it, Big Dot, I *enjoy* it. And it’s legal, you know. I *am* a cop.”

“Why ain’t you home with Angie, Freeman? It’s Christmas Eve.” Big Dot had never met Angie Freeman, but she felt like she’d known her for years.

“I know what day it is, God damn it.”

“Oh, wait. Your in-laws, right? Can’t say’s I blame you, Freeman. What a pain in the ass they can be. Thank God, mine are gone to the Lord.”

“You could be home with your cat, too, you know. You don’t have to stay open Christmas Eve. It’s a fuckin’ crime they let you. What would Jesus say?”

It always riled Big Dot when Freeman said “God damn” or anything else remotely sacrilegious.

“Don’ you be talkin’ ’bout the Lor’ that way, child.” Big Dot yanked out a damp cloth tucked somewhere behind her apron string and started wiping the bar between them. “Neeceaaaah. You know why I stay open on Christmas.”

For a flashing moment, Freeman had forgot that the original Big, Dot’s husband, had been killed on Christmas Day. No one had ever been caught. He’d been working extra hours and holidays, saving up for a winter cruise in the Caribbean on one of those cheap package deals on a liner out of Miami.

“I used to sing in the church choir Christmas Day service,” Big Dot mused, half to herself, “but that was when my man Big was alive. In fact, I was *at* the service when he went down. After he passed, just didn’t have the same meanin’ fer me, Christmas. So I’m here ’stead o’ church.”

The joint had been called Big’s Jungle Bar, and when her husband was killed, Dot took over, tacking up her name after the faded word “Big” out front when she got tired of telling the same story over and over about how her man had died. Now, nobody asked anymore. It’d al-

ways been Big Dot's Jungle Bar to the young professionals moving into the area and cleaning it up, driving up the rents.

She had a son she worked hard to put through college. He did well, got recruited by Microsoft, which shipped him south to Atlanta. He'd been after Big Dot to move down and retire, but she wasn't ready.

"He got a life o' his own, two kids, the wife's all skinny an' pretty, college girl, ya know? They don' need me down there gittin' in the way."

"Hmm," mumbled Freeman. All was clear.

Freeman turned his head toward the bottle of black Jack, fought with himself for a heartbeat and a half, then poured another drink.

Chapter 11

Even little Johnny Barkett was taking matters more seriously now. After the shootings, it came home to him that there would be no more fun and games about *this* robbery. These men meant business. Johnny was stuffed in at the end of his pew, next to the narrow aisle at the side of the church, next to the columns with the latticework between them. He wondered if there was any way they could break through the latticework to the protected aisle on the other side, but even he could see how strong the thick oaken leaves were.

There was no escape.

Being shorter than everyone else, he could not see anything that happened until the shooting started and everyone plunged for cover. He had hesitated, just for a chance to see something happen firsthand, without having to hear from his father, who all evening had been too distracted watching events to pass on their substance to his son in any detail. But even as Johnny saw the two robbers in the center aisle shoot down their victims, he didn't get to see much more because his dad pulled him with a firm swift yank down under cover.

That was that.

Now they were all standing again, singing *Faith of Our Fathers*, which was beginning to make Johnny sick. He already knew it by heart and wished they would change their minds and make them sing something else—*anything* else.

At least now he might get to see *something*. They had come to his pew and people were starting to turn and file out into the center aisle. Johnny's heart began to beat faster. His dad turned to him.

"Give me your hand, Johnny."

"*Oh, Daaad!* I can take care of myself."

This was embarrassing.

“Don’t talk back to me, son. Give me your hand. This is serious.” Mr. Barkett reached down and took him by the hand and held it tightly as they began to move out.

The robbers were crowding more and more people into the aisle—faster now than their companions at the rail could search and send them back—so the line was starting to back up and stall. There were about five people still in Johnny’s pew when the flow to the rail stopped dead and there was nowhere convenient to put anybody else.

Domasky was in a hurry, however.

“Hurry it up, get on out here!”

He pulled the people out, herding them into the aisle.

“Stay in line!” Amagno snapped to them, but the line was bulging and getting too fat to call a line anymore.

Domasky put his hand on top of Johnny’s head and pushed him out of the pew not-too-roughly, squeezing behind him to get inside the pew.

God, one of them touched me! Johnny thought as a chill ran down his spine. The line wasn’t moving now, and Johnny was standing in the center aisle, the last person in the long line that extended back from the sanctuary. He was still even with his pew, and he couldn’t see down to the front of the church, so he watched Domasky as he searched the pew, still mouthing the words to *Faith of Our Fathers*. Domasky had gone all the way back to where he’d been sitting, and started back, occasionally leaning down to look under the pew, checking the prayer books, hymnals, brackets, turning up the cushions to glance beneath, but he was finding very little in the way of valuables left behind.

Johnny noticed that the man was wearing only one glove, and he wondered if the police would be able to find fingerprints. But then he realized that with the thousands of fingerprints on each pew, the police would never single out his.

Then he saw something that made his eyes go wide. And he was sure he was the only one who saw it because of the peculiar position the

robber was in when he did it, and the perfect position Johnny was in to see him do it. Everyone else was looking straight ahead, looking at the action down by the Communion rail, halfheartedly singing, not looking at the man in the pew for fear they would draw his attention.

The man was halfway down the pew kneeling on all fours looking underneath. His head was bent over. With his ungloved hand, he took a piece of chewing gum Johnny had noticed he'd been chomping out of his mouth and stuck it underneath the pew. Why he didn't just throw it on the floor, Johnny couldn't figure out. Maybe it was just a habit to stick the gum there, like he did in school under his desk when the teacher wasn't looking. Everybody did that. It was habit. Reflex. Second nature. You did it without really thinking about it. His dad was still clutching his hand, and when the robber got back to his feet, Johnny quickly turned his head away and concentrated on the back of his father's suit, singing *Faith of Our Fathers* with a renewed urgency as loud as he could.

At this point, they started moving—and pretty fast, too—as the line loosened up. In a minute, there were others in the line behind him as the next pew was emptied. But Johnny kept thinking about the gum. It was all he could think about.

The gum.

Chapter 12

“The police seem to have the demonstration under control again,” said the WNBC newscaster. “For a moment there, it looked like the women would break through the barricades and storm the church.”

The TV crew had worked its way through the barriers and were now set up between the main entrance on one side and the police and chanting women on the other.

Simon was behind the crew, on the highest step—as far away from them as he could get—under the portals of the main entrance. There was nowhere he could hide, not really, and there wasn’t much else he could do but stand there and try to look inconspicuous, which, when you think about it, is pretty impossible when you’re wearing a white carnation, thought Simon. How do you blend in with a crowd when you look like somebody at a wedding? Simon kept watching the news people out of the corner of his eye—corner of his eye because though they were right in front of him, he kept looking to the left or right—anything to avoid looking *at* them. The last thing he needed was to attract *their* attention.

The reporter, Brian Anderson, was facing the church, looking at the camera, which was pointed at the mob behind him.

“The purpose of this group—the Front for the Liberation of Lesbian Clergy—is spelled out by its name. They stand for equal rights for all women, but more particularly, gay women. Their leader is Janie Parkhurst. We’ve already talked to her once and will try to get her on camera again shortly.”

The reporter started circling around his cameraman, who pivoted to follow him. He continued talking, and they slowly switched positions, with the newscaster’s back to the church and the camera pointing up the steps toward Simon under the portals.

“What makes this a dramatic confrontation is the fact that Janie’s father is the Reverend Emory Parkhurst, rector of historic Trinity

Church.” Anderson turned and looked toward Simon and the church’s facade. “Inside, midnight mass is being conducted by Father Parkhurst, who now has nothing to do with his daughter, although publicly he has issued no comment and refuses all interviews with the media.”

Simon was watching them—still out of the corner of his eye—but wasn’t able to hear the reporter’s words. Then the dazzling, artificial light atop the handheld camera died out and the reporter turned and was walking up the steps toward him, the cameraman and other crew right behind him. Simon felt a fluttering sensation in his stomach, approaching nausea.

“What do you want?” Simon demanded a little too nervously.

“We’d like to get some official reaction to the demonstration.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“You’re an usher, aren’t you?”

“Uh, of course I am.”

The reporter nodded.

On went the light with a droning sound as it powered up. Simon’s mouth dropped open as the light blinded him and he realized he was being *filmed*, for Chrissakes.

“But I’m not official, nothing I say’s official, you see? You have to talk to the PR department, the uh, maybe Mr. Parkhurst, but not *me!* I don’t know anything.”

“Your reaction as a member of this church will do,” said the reporter with a smile, looking into the camera, and holding his mike up. “We have here one of the ushers of Trinity Church,” he said.

Then the mike was under his nose.

“What is your name?”

Simon felt this was what the quiz shows must be like.

“Uh, ... Fletcher, ... John Fletcher.” What was he supposed to do? Smile? Look concerned? He hadn’t been told about this possibility. It scared him. And if they had him on tape, couldn’t he prove to be a burden later on the others would be anxious to unload? Nothing had been

said about protests, bull dykes and lipstick lesbians, *cameras*, for Chris-sakes.

Jesus. Branch would have runny shit when he found out about *this*.

“John Fletcher. I’m assistant head usher.”

Sounded reasonable.

“What is your reaction to this demonstration by the Front for the Liberation of Lesbian Clergy?”

“Well,” said Simon, “they have their rights, I guess—”

No, that’s wrong!

“But they haven’t got any right to make it tough, uh, I mean, they shouldn’t be out here making ass—”

That, either!

“We have our rights, too, to, uh, worship, you see? And they’re trying to stop us.”

He looked away from the camera—he hadn’t been able *not* to look into it for some reason—and looked at the reporter. Simon was really sweating it now.

“What do you think about the ordination of gay women into the priesthood?”

Christ! What do I know?

“Uh, into the priesthood?”

What did ordination mean? Exactly? He didn’t know for sure.

“Yes. Should gay women be priests?”

“I don’t know,” he said flatly.

Did any of this *matter*? he wondered. These days, who *cared* about either one, dykes or priests?

“Has this demonstration disrupted the service inside?”

Simon looked at him sharply.

“*No!* Everything’s going on like normal!” Then quickly: “You can’t take a camera in there! *You can’t do that!*” He was beside himself.

“That’s not necessary, thank you.”

All of a sudden a man, his wife and an adolescent son appeared beside them.

"Can we get in?" the man interjected.

Simon was having trouble keeping his cool in front of the camera and not blowing the whole operation. *Now this!*

"No, no more. We're full up." He was beginning to worry about his English grammar. He knew it wasn't the greatest under the best of circumstances.

"But we've come all the way from uptown."

"Sorry. We're full."

"We've waited all year for this service. *Please!*"

"Orders. I can't let you in."

By now Mike Harris had come up to see if everything was all right. The man turned to him.

"Officer, this man won't let us in. We've come all the way downtown for this service."

"Why can't he go inside?" Harris asked.

Simon remembered what he'd been told to say.

"Fire regulations, that's why. We're up to capacity now, probably over. The fire marshal won't let any more in. Mr. Parkhurst told us to stand by this, no matter what."

"But I know Father Parkhurst personally. He'll let me in," protested the man.

"He *can't* right now," said Simon heatedly. "He's doing the service," and pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "What do you want me to do? Call him out here to talk to you?"

"You don't have to be rude," said the man in a huff, turning back to the officer.

"Can't you squeeze three more people in, just to please this man?" Harris asked, trying to moderate.

“And break the law? Not me,” Simon said finally, folding his arms. “And I’ll report you if you try to make me let ’im in. I’m not supposed to let anybody—and I mean *anybody*—in this church.”

“Sorry, mister,” said the cop. “It’s the law. You know the law.”

“I’m going to have a talk with Father Parkhurst about this. What’s your name?”

“John Fletcher,” said Simon with a tad more confidence this time than he had said the name before, thinking:

Oh, God!

The lights!

The camera!

The man!

The cop!

Just then the reporter stuck his mike between them.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said to the man, “I understand you’re a member of this church.”

“That’s right,” he replied, beaming with newfound importance as the light above the camera was turned directly on him.

Simon breathed more easily—but not much—and tried to sort out everything in his head. He kept thinking there would be hell to pay when Branch found out about the camera and the news crew. Especially the camera. But he’d done his best. What else could he do? He wondered if it would be possible to get his cut and split before Manny found out about the camera.

“What do you think of the demonstration?”

The man turned for a brief nasty look at the crowd of militant women.

“Disgusting. That’s all I can say. They ought to be locked up.”

“What does your wife think?” the reporter asked, angling toward the suddenly self-conscious woman.

“She agrees with me,” the husband said pointedly, stabbing his own chest.

An arched eyebrow indicated very clearly what the wife thought.

“Don’t you?” hubbie half-demanded.

“I don’t believe *gay* women ought to be in the church,” she said, adopting the same serious tone she used when she addressed the PTA.

“No, they ought to be in jail, if you ask me,” her spouse volunteered.

The reporter tried to show by his indifference that he wasn’t asking him.

Simon rolled his eyes to heaven, wondering when in Christ’s holy name this would all end.

Chapter 13

Kolsnar and the Gerards were at the very aisle end of their pew, originally with Kolsnar wedged between the two Gerards. When the robbery was well under way, Kolsnar made Gerard switch positions with him so he could have a look at the way the gang was handling the traffic flow down to the rail.

As the parishioners made their way down to the rail—pew by pew—Kolsnar saw that what they wanted mainly was the jewelry, plus whatever cash they could snatch. They were taking wallets, however.

So Kolsnar and the Gerards were the first to leave their pew when the flow reached them. Domasky was standing in front of them as they made their way out, but before anyone else could leave, Domasky saw the briefcase Kolsnar had edged beneath the pew, just the corner of it sticking out.

“Wait a minute,” he said, raising his hand and stopping the flow. He reached down, hauled the briefcase out, and tossed it to Gerard, who caught it without realizing it would be so heavy. “Take that down front, mister.”

“Yes, of course,” said Gerard to the robber before he turned to Kolsnar as they began moving in line. “I hope there’s nothing of value in here, Charlie.”

Kolsnar was doing his best. He didn’t think he was showing any emotion now, just as he tried not to when he saw \$200 million bucks sailing through the air into Gerard’s outstretched arms.

“Just routine papers. They probably won’t even open it.”

That was hoping against hope, he knew, but there was nothing else he could do. He was already resigned to losing the bonds, accepted it as inevitable, and was looking ahead to the time when he would see some of these men without their dime store masks. He felt the bulk of his gun in his shoulder holster. A lot of good that would do him in this set up.

* * *

Outside, Jimmy Simon looked at his watch. It wouldn't be too much longer now. It *couldn't* be too much longer. Time was short.

* * *

Manny Branch was looking at the time, too. If everything went on as planned, they would finish about ten minutes behind schedule, excellent on the whole, he thought. He'd ordered his men to stop frisking the victims about twenty minutes earlier. The haul was much larger than he'd expected. It just remained to be seen how many of the diamonds were fakes.

"Hurry up, Ginny," Gerard said calmly when they got to the rail. "Give them everything."

"Yes, dear." Mrs. Gerard looked up at Em Parkhurst, heavily sweating and still under guard, and felt sorry for him.

Kolsnar was emptying his pockets—rapidly. With his pistol just under his jacket, he didn't want to invite a complete search.

He tossed \$15,000 in C-notes into a basket and Branch immediately picked it up.

Branch had just picked up the briefcase when he saw the huge wad drop.

"Quite a roll, mister," he said to Kolsnar.

"That's a lot of money, Charlie," said Gerard.

"Expenses."

"No one's had this much on him," said Marcus Riley, the robber helping to sort and bag the loot.

Branch held up the briefcase and nodded toward Gerard.

"Hey, dude, what kind of business do you do on Christmas Eve?" he asked Gerard.

"It's not mine. It's his," Gerard said, aiming a thumb in Kolsnar's direction.

“Just paperwork from the office,” Kolsnar said calmly, remembering how easily he’d passed Harry and the other guard back at the office.

He reached out to take the case from Branch.

Branch pulled it away—out of his grasp.

Kolsnar noticed the man guarding Parkhurst now had his machine pistol trained on them.

“It’s just routine paperwork,” he said again.

Branch was turning the heavy case over in his hands.

“Maybe.”

Branch tried to open it. No give. He looked at Kolsnar and held his hand out.

“Keys.” Kolsnar searched his pockets, felt the key, but looked up to the man and shook his head. No.

“Sure,” Branch smiled behind his Jesus Christ face.

He propped the briefcase against his thigh and slipped out a splendid long-bladed knife from beneath his robe and pried away at the locks on what was basically a work of art in leather, a \$2,500 item from Peal & Co., a gift from his wife two Christmases ago.

Kolsnar thought quickly about his gun, but decided against trying anything because another man was also standing guard at the rail with a MAC-10 on them. He didn’t have a chance. His hands felt clammy.

Both locks clicked loose.

Kolsnar closed his eyes.

The locks had a fast spring action and snapped open *just-like-that*. The lid flew open before Branch could catch it and \$200 million dollars in negotiable bonds tumbled out onto the floor for all to see.

Mute, Randolph Gerard stared at the bonds. The searching stopped as robbers and members of the congregation huddled around the rail stood like stone, their eyes transfixed on the bonds.

Branch knelt down and examined them closely, then looked up to Kolsnar.

“They’re made out to ... ‘Bearer.’ ” There was an uncomprehending—and then knowing—tone in his voice. He looked admiringly at Kolsnar. “Nice night’s work, buddy. What is this, a Christmas bonus?”

Gerard’s mouth slowly got wider as it dawned on him. But he turned to Kolsnar, shaking his head, not willing to believe what the evidence told him was the truth. He could not conceive a senior member of his firm being capable of something like this.

“And we just happened to run into you,” Gerard said in a low whisper, dumbly.

“Yeah, how ’bout that?” Kolsnar said with an edge, an acid tone of bitterness curling round his words.

“How much is here?” Branch asked as he got back to his feet.

“Hundred forty or fifty million net, give or take, and,” he added with importance, “depending on who you deal with.” Kolsnar had a sour I’ve-been-had expression on his face. He wasn’t really angry with the robbers. He had a refined sense of fate. This was just one of those things. But it was one of those BIG things.

The enormity of the embezzlement had finally sunk into Gerard’s thick head, and if a head is a stack, Gerard was about to blow his.

“You rotten, lying, swine of a crook,” he said to Kolsnar.

Kolsnar had too much on his mind to worry about a pansy like Gerard now.

“Listen, asshole,” he said with condescension, “if I can live with losing the bonds to this guy, you ought to be able to live with the idea of losing them to me.”

“Either way, my company loses.”

“Either way, you’ve got insurance. And either way, you can afford it.” Kolsnar smiled impatiently. Gerard was now speechless with anger.

“You guys work it out later,” said Branch, abruptly interrupting, leaning down quickly to scoop the bonds back into the briefcase. He handed it to Ritter when he closed it and looked at Kolsnar.

“Tough luck, dude.”

"I'd certainly call it that," Kolsnar smiled like a cobra.

"Okay, move on, both of you," Branch gestured.

Gerard turned to Branch.

"But wait! This man works for me!"

"Not any more, I have a feeling," said Kolsnar, scratching his head.

Gerard ignored him.

"He stole those bonds—embezzled them—from *my company!*"

Gerard was in a blind rage now. "*Those are my bonds! I want them back!*"

"Sorry, bud." Branch was unemotional. "Now move on." Branch held up his weapon. Gerard didn't even see it.

"But he *stole* them from me!"

"And *I'm* stealing them from him, understand? If you want something done about this guy, mister, you're talking to the wrong guy. Get it? Now *MOVE!*"

Gerard started stammering as Riley, laughing, pushed them away. On the way back to their pew, Gerard could contain himself no longer and raised an arm to strike Kolsnar, who deftly blocked the swing down and twisted Gerard's arm behind him. He was pissed off at Gerard now, and let him know it by pulling his arm back hard. He knew it wasn't the robbers' fault he was there to begin with. It was Gerard's.

"Start a fight with me, Gerard, and they'll shoot you down just like the others. How'd you and your little cunt Ginny like that?" he sneered.

"Control yourself, Randy," his wife, who was right next to them, implored. "*Please!*" she'd seen the other side of Charles Kolsnar, and she didn't like what she was seeing.

Gerard fought his own strong emotions and brought himself down from his personal mountain of fury, breathing hard from the effort and labor. They went quietly back to their pew as Amagno bore down on them to break up the fisticuffs.

Domasky had emptied the last two pews.

They were finished.

Branch signaled to Scaglione in the gallery. The music stopped at once. The last few people were giving over their possessions. The congregation looked up at Branch.

“You will all sing *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*, and sing it all the way through. At the end, you’re free to go, but not before. Anybody trying to be a hero will get the same Christmas present they did,” he motioned toward the bodies in the center aisle roughly rolled up against the pews. Branch signaled Scaglione again and the organist started playing.

Now they moved fast.

As the singing started, Scaglione swept down the stairs from the gallery and ran down the side aisle toward the sanctuary. Amagno and Domasky and the others collected at the rail and each grabbed two sacks to carry away. Riley and Branch watched the congregation from the top of the spiral staircase as the others descended quickly and scuttled along the corridor at the bottom. Then Riley went down. Branch waited a few seconds longer, then dipped into the well, reached the bottom ...

... *and RAN!*

Chapter 14

Jimmy Simon looked closely at his watch, and then nervously at the demonstration, which had lost its power; the women seemed to be tiring, weakening, getting ready to break it up, but this was deceptive. They were just hanging around to heat up again when the people came out of the church. The police during this lull were steadying themselves for another assault on the church as its members came out. Simon was listening carefully to the music. He could only faintly hear it. Now it stopped. Good, he thought. That was the way it was supposed to happen. A few minutes later it started again, but it was a different hymn now:

It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.

His cue.

He examined the cops. They were all facing the dykes. He walked out onto the top step, quickly reached up and took the carnation out of his lapel and held it within a closed hand. Then, very smoothly, very unobtrusively, and entirely unnoticed, he walked down the steps, flush against the heavy stone of the building, and around a column, dropping the carnation to the street as he rounded the corner, out of sight.

He got into the van about the same time Marcus Riley did. Forty seconds later Manny Branch—the last one—hopped into the van through the open rear door, slammed it shut and Al Galati, the driver, hit the gas and skidded off with a painful high-pitched squeal into the murky darkness toward the Hudson River.

* * *

John McTaggart had called the Jungle Bar and Big Dot told him Amos was sitting at the end of the bar feeling sorry for himself, and John said he was on his way, not to tell Amos he was coming.

But he decided Amos could manage his life an extra few minutes without knowing the fate of Mr. Robert Dakers, which, now that he was dead, would hold up for months the case Amos had been working on.

He'd been listening to the radio reports about the congested area around Trinity caused by the demonstration, and wanted to drive by to have a look. He had to go over to the West Side anyhow.

Traffic was terrible leading up to Trinity Church. Limousines and taxis, along with squad cars, police vans, barricades, a riot unit, rescue vehicles and a couple of ambulances (just in case, thought McTaggart) created an impossible tangle. He knew from experience that the streets on either side a block away were most likely empty, and you could go seventy miles an hour uptown if you wanted to. But now he was pretty much trapped by the traffic, so he edged over to the curb about a block and a half from the church and got out to walk.

Nearing the church itself, he made his way through the barricades and bumped into Sergeant Harris, a uniformed man out of his precinct he'd worked with many times before.

"Got your hands full," McTaggart said.

"Sure do, John. If we can just get everybody out of the church without any trouble, it'll be all over."

McTaggart looked at the disorderly front line of regular officers who were holding the barricades in place against the surging protesters. Behind them stood the iron-straight line of special riot police with their white sticks, ready to move on command to disperse the crowd if and when ordered.

They were impressive.

“How much longer before it’s over inside?”

Harris looked at his watch.

“Can’t be much longer. They’re running late as it is.”

“Christmas Eve,” McTaggart explained with a nod.

“Yeah, it’s always longer, I guess.”

Harris looked over his shoulder at the church.

“They had an usher out here most of the time, but he’s gone now.”

* * *

The Reverend Emory Parkhurst sang *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear* with his congregation. After the bandits were clearly gone, a few people stopped singing and made tentative moves to leave, but Parkhurst raised his arms and they stayed in their pews. No one left. And everyone continued singing until the Christmas carol was fully finished.

When it was over there was an eerie silence throughout the church, in the choir, among the attendants, and in the congregation. No one moved or spoke and all—all—looked at Parkhurst, who stood where he had stood throughout the agonizing ordeal—in the center of the sanctuary.

Instinctively, it seemed to the congregation—Richard Whitney was almost moved to tears—Parkhurst raised his hand and gave the benediction:

“The Peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord: And the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be amongst you, and remain with you always.”

Then there was that silence again, creeping through the whole church like a living presence. There were the dead men who had tried to fight, and others killed by wild bullets while cowering in their pews, now crumpled and piled in the aisle against the pews, the staring faces, some stifled sobs—and the silence.

It didn't last long. It just seemed like it. Within ten seconds of completing the benediction, Father Parkhurst strode hesitantly toward a few steps, now holding the cross around his neck in his fist. He dropped it and pointed to the rear of the church.

“Now, for God's sake, break open the doors!”

Then the rush started, the madness came out, the panic and fear for so many long minutes repressed, spread—and people began to move, to inch forward at first, and then to surge. No, they began to run, push, shove, with more power and urgency than the robbers had used...

... to get out!

That was all that mattered to everyone in the church:

GETTING OUT!

A gaggle of men converged at once on the great historic bronze doors of Trinity Church, worked at the huge handles, and with one mighty, hysterical effort, breached the doors open wide.

The center aisle was simply stuffed with human bodies, flailing arms, screaming voices. The slave ships were not as crowded as that center aisle, as everyone pushed and squeezed as they edged their way from the pews into the middle aisle. When the doors were finally opened wide, the people shot out of the church like water backed up, pouring out under the high portals, cascading in waves down onto the stone steps of the church, ignoring the side steps, using only the ones leading straight down and out—and into the backs of the parade-straight line of riot police, which broke apart instantly as the human breakers fell upon it, submerging the riot police as effortlessly as the Red Sea swallowed the Egyptians on Moses' command.

* * *

“What the fu—?” Harris started to say as he turned toward the people pouring down on them.

“What’s the matter?” asked McTaggart.

“Hell if I know, hell if I know! Something fuckin’ awful!”

Kolsnar had just reached the inner glass doors of the church before he heard Gerard's voice rise in a lordly howl above the noise and screaming.

“Stop him! Stop him! Kolsnar! He’s a thief! The bonds! He took the bonds!”

Then, miraculously, thought Kolsnar, the old man got to him through the melee and grasped his shoulder. Kolsnar did not want this, but he had no choice now. As Kolsnar allowed Gerard to pull him around by the shoulder, he dug under his jacket for his gun. When he

was facing Gerard, he grabbed his boss around the waist and pulled him close in a tight hug, sticking the gun deep into the banker's soft, fat belly. Gerard was looking Kolsnar in the face, felt the metal jab him deep, and his eyes went wide as a madman's scream escaped from his mouth before Kolsnar fired once.

Only the few people immediately around them heard the shot in all the confusion, but no one seemed to care when Gerard slumped to the floor against a column behind one of the glass doors. Kolsnar dove back into the flood of crazed worshippers and let the momentum carry him to freedom.

* * *

Johnny Barkett was being pulled through the madness by his father, held to him only by the fast grip of his dad's hand. People got in his way and his dad's grip was stretched, hurting the boy to the point that he wanted to cry out. His dad wouldn't let go, either.

Finally, Johnny was up against his father.

"Dad, I saw something, dad! *DAD!*"

"*Shut up!*" he was ordered.

"But it's *important!*"

"*Not now! God damn it!*"

* * *

The police didn't know what to think.

Much less, what to do.

The front line of riot police turned to see what was going on and the line weakened as the protesters pressed against it. The riot boys were caught in the middle. Within a minute of the first flood of people through the doors, regular officers and protesters had mixed and mingled with members of the church, crushing the riot police between

them. It looked like a Marxist revolution had occurred, mixing high and low in one great swirling basin of humanity.

McTaggart, separated at once from Harris in the confusion, grabbed the first worshiper he could hold still for a few seconds.

“What is it? What happened?”

“Robbers!” screamed the middle-aged man he was holding by both shoulders. The man was hysterical. “We were robbed! Right in the church! A dozen masked men! They killed a dozen, maybe two dozen, I don’t know!”

“Robbers?” McTaggart asked, incredulous.

“Yes, robbers!” the man stared at him. “They took everything, killed a bunch of people!”

He let the man go and started working his way to the portals to get inside the church, having to fight every inch of the way against frenzied people trying to get out.

Who would rob a *church*? he asked himself. And with all these cops right out front? Somebody had guts. McTaggart was just thinking as he pushed his way through the people how a salmon must feel churning its way back upriver during mating season, when he saw a man not fifteen feet away from him break out of the flow of the people and run down the side steps no one else was using—toward a dark street that would take him behind the church out of sight. It wasn’t this that caught McTaggart’s eye, however. It was the glint of iron in the moonlight as the man moved a pistol across his chest and stuffed it into his concealed shoulder holster.

The man was running down the steps toward the darkness beyond, out of sight, out of reach.

McTaggart fought his way through, working against the flood of people, already reaching for his own gun.

He broke free and the words came from deep within his stomach.

“STOP OR I SHOOT!”

He was on the edge of the crowd now, holding both hands on his pistol, aiming it at the man's back.

Kolsnar stopped and turned.

Just then someone in the crowd speeding past brushed against McTaggart's back hard enough to make him trip on the top side step. He stumbled and rolled over, trying in the very fall to roll around in the right direction and get a shot off.

Kolsnar smiled.

He had his gun out in half a second, less than a heartbeat, and got off two rounds, turned and ran for the safety of the darkness.

Sergeant John McTaggart continued to fall down the cold, hard granite side steps of Trinity Church, but he was no longer trying to cushion his fall, because he no longer could see the steps, no longer feel himself fall, no longer hear the hair-raising noises coming from the people around him.

One of Kolsnar's two very lucky shots entered McTaggart's neck two inches below his right earlobe, penetrating deep enough to all but sever the spinal cord. The other shot could not possibly have been luckier. It slammed into McTaggart's right eye on a tiny upward angle, tunneling through the soft flesh and a million delicate nerves like a flash fire of light—so swift it was painless—and crashed into the cerebrum, digging its way with ease through the mushy body of the brain and penetrating the corpus callosum, the network of fibers holding all the parts of the brain together.

And while Kolsnar disappeared as he found his way into the shadows cast by the looming edifice of Trinity Church, John McTaggart found another kind of darkness.

Chapter 15

There had been somewhat of a rush at Big Dot's Jungle Bar. A merry band of five people had come in at the same time. But they had drifted away after a single round of drinks and things had pretty much gotten back to normal—now there were only a couple of other patrons besides Freeman.

Big Dot slowly made her way down the bar toward Freeman.

“By the way, where's McTaggart these days? Haven't seen him lately.”

“Who knows?” He was quiet for a moment, musing about nothing in particular, lost in a reverie. “Think I'll pack it in, bossman,” he added, pushing the bottle away with a pat on the neck and shoulder. “Keep this one warm, now.”

“He'll be here.”

“See you next week.”

That meant tomorrow.

Freeman got up, shook his shoulders down, and walked along the line of barstools toward the street door, the bar on one side, a few empty booths on the other. Mottled wax was still on the tabletops of the booths—a remembrance from the days when Big Dot had candles in the booths in a pitiful effort to create “atmosphere.”

The only sign in the decor of any connection with the name Big Dot's Jungle Bar was the scruffy, roach-eaten thatching applied cons ago to the “hood” above the bar. It ran the length of the place. The older regulars often talked of the days when Dot would sing Gospel music while her husband Big tended bar. It had been a festive little joint. The thatching was thin now, and Freeman often noticed dirt in his drinks—when he could see them, that is. He knew where it came from. Roaches loosening the thatching, dry as tinder, when they moved around.

Dirty black bastards.

“*By the way, Big Dot!*” Freeman turned near the door, roaches on his mind.

“Yeah?” Big Dot raised her voice from the other end.

“This place is a *sty!* A filthy hog hole!”

“Eat it, Freeman. You might drive all my business away,” Big Dot said with complete unconcern.

“The God damn roaches are using this joint as a jumping off place to invade the fucking city! You could film a horror movie in here.”

“Yeah, starring *you!* Anyway, I raise roaches as a hobby.”

“And the john smells like shit! Not piss. Shit! Doesn’t anybody but me piss in there? Did I ever tell you how much this place stinks?”

“No.”

“I’m telling you now,” Freeman nodded, not too soberly.

“You want gardenias? Move to Westchester,” Big Dot smiled, cleaning a glass. “Merry Christmas.”

Freeman smiled back and waved goodbye, and started to turn when he noticed the two customers at the bar looking at him with expressions just this side of shocked. He bent himself in their direction, his manner concerned and confidential.

“Don’t worry, folks. I’m an officer of the law. I can call myself up and arrest me and throw me in the slammer where it only smells like piss.”

The customers turned back to their drinks.

Freeman went out onto Blyton Street. If TriBeCa could be said to have a lousy block in it that hadn’t yet been gentrified, Big Dot’s Jungle Bar was on it. Tiny Blyton Street, just off the West Side Highway. Dot’d had plenty of excellent offers for her place, but she had a long lease and wasn’t budging, even though the newer upscale residents were not what you’d call her ideal demographic. Freeman told Big Dot—warned her all the time—that she’d get mugged sooner or later in this location. Just like her husband. Okay during the daytime. But too quiet at night. Ought to move the bar to Queens where she lived. All Big Dot had

done was make some shitty-ass slur about the crummy-paid-under-the-table cops in this fucked up town.

Or something to that effect.

Freeman caught his reflection in the Jungle Bar's grimy storefront windows that hadn't been cleaned in months. It was too dark to see his periwinkle eyes. "Actually, a tad more purple than blue," his mother had always told people, embarrassing Freeman.

His hair was shaggy, too, falling just above his collar. Dot had been after him to work on his hair. Go to a proper hair salon instead of a cheap barber shop and get a good job done. "You'll look like a movie star," she'd said. Freeman wore pretty much his standard uniform: a Navy blue blazer, white dress shirt, the same tie he wore every day with a tiny mustard stain on it he thought nobody ever noticed (but everybody did), gray slacks. His badge and gun were strapped to his belt.

He crossed Blyton to get to his car.

On the passenger's side of the front seat of Freeman's unmarked car were the presents: one each for his parents, for the in-laws, for Angie, for his sister Dahlia, who was married to an accountant and lived, idiot, in Green Bay, Wisconsin, where, Freeman was absolutely convinced, they had the Cold Weather Market cornered, and one for his sister Helen and her Park Avenue husband, Bert Eglamore, one of those suddenly wealthy British hedge fund managers who got out with all his cash intact before the fund he managed went south. Needless to say, all his former cronies who lost billions hated his guts.

Then he smiled when he saw four very special presents, two each for Speedy and Pat, the nine-year-old twins belonging to John and Patricia McTaggart. He loved those boys.

He always did his holiday shopping on Christmas Eve. It didn't take long and he could devote himself to that task and it alone, and he could get the damn business over with.

As he looked woozily at the boxes, though, he couldn't remember what was *in* any of them. He looked at them closely for a minute in the

dappled light thrown by the street lamp coming through the branches of a poor dying tree in front of Big Dot's. They were all gaily wrapped in the greens, reds and blues of the season. Bright, curly ribbons were tousled over the boxes. The design on one of the wrapping papers was a laughing, wholesome face of Santa. A hundred identical faces on the paper laughed merrily back at Freeman, tongues showing and eyes crinkled shut in mirth.

All he could think about as he looked into two hundred identical crinkly Santa eyes was his upcoming birthday and how he'd screwed around and let thirty-five years slip away with nothing to show for it. He was convinced he'd ruined his life, that it might be too late to turn it in another direction so all would not be lost. Did he have the courage it would take? He had his doubts.

"Bullshit," he said aloud.

Freeman burped a little burp and felt incredibly crude, like a country hick, a rube, uncouth, unmannered. Burping, belching, hiccupping in a joint called the Jungle Bar. What kind of asshole is that? And what kind of asshole lived a life like the one he was living now?

He reached inside his suit jacket and pulled out his cell phone, turned it on, saw there were several messages from McTaggart, but decided he was too much of a mess to deal with anything or anybody right now. He ignored all the voicemail alerts.

He started his car and put it into gear and headed over to Hudson and then downtown. He passed the expensive restaurant Nobu at Franklin Street and saw the Christmas revelers coming out into the freezing night. He had his window cracked and so heard the laughter. The stores and restaurants were all decorated for the season.

A few blocks further down he passed one of Daniel Boulud's places. He'd never been to any of them, but he read about them in the *Times*, even though he was more of a *Post* person. John's wife Patricia always read the *Times*. So he'd recently begun reading it every day. The restaurant critic was a little prissy for his taste, but whatever. In one review

he'd gone on for three paragraphs about *fennel*, for Christ's sake. What *was* fennel, anyway? Who the fuck were the people who ate it? The wine critic didn't write like that. He was sure the restaurant guy must be one nasty queen.

He felt his eyes moistening as he thought of Speedy and Pat, of a life he didn't have. Never would have.

Some of the busier downtown clubs and lounge would just be cranking up, not that it was after midnight. Traffic was light.

Suddenly, his radio burst into activity. There was static. Voices overlaid. Reception was shitty. There were orders. Repeats. Counter orders. Confusion.

But he heard the call for squads—traffic, rescue, lab. *Homicide*. Everything. It was coming from the street cops handling the demonstration in front of Trinity Church. Then his radio made a sputtering noise and died like a whining squirrel.

"*Wake up, you radio bastard motherfucker!*" Freeman screamed at the thing, banging it with his fist.

"*Fuck!*" he spat in desperation.

He reached for his belt radio to switch it on. (He'd had it off along with his cell phone while at Big Dot's.)

He hit the dashboard flasher and siren as he turned onto Broadway coming off Warren for a direct shot down to the Battery. He hit the floorboard with a dull thud. The car lurched forward with the squeal of a slaughtered pig, and ...*f-l-e-w!*

Chapter 16

A badge couldn't get you through the traffic blocking Broadway. A miracle might have worked, but Freeman didn't have one on him at the moment, so he got out and ran the rest of the way after slipping his car through every hole it would fit through, resorting at times to the sidewalk until a hydrant or light pole forced him back into the street.

As for the noise, the horns, shouting, people dodging everywhere, the confusion caused by a mass of hysterical people—Freeman hardly noticed at all, other than to take initial stock of the whole situation. It was a matter of professional calm.

Experience.

But as experienced as he was, there was something that always happened to him when the rush of adrenalin ran through him: he had the uncontrollable urge to pee. He squeezed it back, but it was there nonetheless.

Freeman finally reached Trinity and shook his head when he saw hundreds of people milling about out of control. He was trying to get his precinct on the phone, but couldn't hear. The uniformed people on the scene had done their best trying to keep together as many people who'd been in the church during the—whatever it was that happened. He still wasn't sure. *Fuckin' radio*, he thought. But he did know that some people had been killed, apparently during the service. This was all he knew from the sketchy reports that came to him over the radio before it crackled and went *pssssst*. But he couldn't in his wildest imaginings construct a set of circumstances that would lead to such a thing. And that this should happen in his precinct—the Twenty-eighth—was another layer of salt on the wound. His commanding officer, Captain Alan Ferguson, would turn green when he found out, if he didn't already know. He could see the captain at home now, making friends with his pillow for the night, dreaming of sugarplums, when the telephone rang.

Looking around as he approached the church, Freeman saw Sergeant Mike Harris of his precinct, the man he knew would have been in charge of the force controlling the demonstration earlier.

"Sergeant!"

Harris was holding a gaggle of witnesses together with some of the other men, trying to keep them calm until reinforcements arrived, but it was tough work. Everyone wanted to leave. It was cold, the wind particularly biting, swooping over the Battery not far away and through the financial district with a vengeance. And, in these cases involving over a hundred witnesses, people just wanted to get the hell out and leave the cops to solve it on their own.

"Lieutenant!" came Harris's reply. He left the others and came over to Freeman, who now realized that he was the first detective on the scene.

"What the hell happened here, Mike? I heard something on the radio, but it died on me coming down here."

"Lieutenant," Harris began, and Freeman could see the clear expression of incredulity on the cop's face, *"ten guys just robbed Trinity Church!"*

"Robbed!?"

"Ten men wearing masks. They all looked like Jesus, *or something,*" Harris tried to explain, bewildered.

"What the fuck?" Freeman said. "Where's the men's room?"

Harris pulled back and gave him a look like no one had ever given him.

"The men's room?"

"Never mind."

The news crew was still on the scene broadcasting live reports. They saw Freeman and Harris conferring and converged on them in seconds. Harris saw them over Freeman's shoulder and shook his head.

"Lieutenant Freeman will have to answer your questions, boys."

"Lieutenant, I'm Brian Anderson."

“Yeah, I know, I recognize you. From TV.”

Anderson smiled. He always felt like the celebrity he knew he was when people recognized him.

“What exactly happened here, Lieutenant?”

Freeman still had to pee like a motherfucker. He ignored Anderson and turned to Harris

“Hold it together till I get back, Mike. I’ve got to pee.”

“Pee?” said Harris.

“Pee?” said an incredulous Anderson, looking around him at the chaos.

Freeman looked at him scornfully.

“It’s something you do with your dick besides jerk on it, asshole. Be right back.”

Freeman moved as fast as he could, but he was walking pigeon-toed and even holding his knees together the way a school kid would, trying desperately to hold it in.

With grunts and moans of agony, he had just mounted about half of the granite steps leading into Trinity Church when his bladder just gave way and he felt the humiliating sensation of warm piss running down his right leg.

He looked down and watched as the urine gushed out of his pants leg into his shoe and pooled around his feet. The pungent smell wafted up to him—warm pee smelled not a little unlike movie house popcorn, he’d always thought. Something about the salt in it, he supposed.

Freeman breathed out a deep sigh of relief and turned around. At least it was over and the excruciating pain was gone in a flash.

Mike Harris and Brian Anderson and others around them all looked at him with a mixture of horror and unrestrained amusement. Some were even sniggering.

He made his way back down the steps and over to the little circle, a cocky attitude in his stride

“Oh, well, I’m back,” he smiled.

“You just pissed yourself, Lieutenant?”

“For a reporter, I can see that you’re not just another pretty face, Anderson. You don’t miss a thing. Very astute.”

“What are you going to do about all this?” Anderson asked, waving his arm around at the scene.

“Hell if I know, right now. Get out of here with that thing,” he pointed to the camera.

“But, Lieutenant—”

“Listen, you butt wipe, what just came outta me was 98.6 degrees, but I’m getting hotter every minute.”

“But—”

“OUT!”

Anderson and his crew still hesitated. But Freeman had things to do. He grabbed two uniformed men from a nearby circle holding witnesses together.

“Get these guys across the street.”

“But, Lieutenant,” Anderson complained, still on the air. “I’m Brian Anderson!”

“I know. From TV.” Freeman turned to the uniformed cops: *“Now move their asses OUT!”* he commanded.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’re being escorted across the street. Apparently the New York Police Department, embarrassed by this unusual crime, and surprised by it, are trying to choke off freedom of the press,” his voice trailed out of Freeman’s hearing. Everybody from his precinct captain to the commissioner would be after his ass tomorrow, he thought.

Fuck ‘em! Fuck ‘em all!

Freeman could now hear the wail of approaching sirens, but knew it would be more than a few minutes before extra units got to the scene through all the traffic. Harris told him where the mayor was, and Freeman made his way through the crowds to find him.

Lindstadt and his wife were surrounded by aides (who stood there doing nothing) and several uniformed men in addition to the crush of people who were naturally drawn to the mayor in the aftermath of the crisis. Freeman walked up and ordered one man to go find the mayor's car and somehow get through the knot of other cars blocking the street.

"But I don't know how to get it through, sir."

"Then you better find a way, boy, or I'll have your ass. *Now MOVE!*"

The officer moved.

"Who are you?" Lindstadt demanded.

"Freeman, Detective Lieutenant, Twenty-eighth Precinct, Mr. Mayor."

"How'd you get here so fast? We just broke out a few minutes ago," Lindstadt was covered with bruises. Freeman could see the anger in the man boiling just beneath the surface.

"I heard about it on my radio. I happened to be, well, just north of here."

"You're the senior person here, then?"

"Yes, sir, and if you'll excuse me, I'll start acting like it."

With that, Freeman turned away from His Honor to the cluster of uniformed men who had gathered around them.

"Until someone else gets here, you take your orders from me," he said in a loud voice that did not mean to be contradicted. The sound of the sirens from reinforcing units was getting louder, slowly and steadily louder, and Freeman guessed they were having to back cars up and clear a path through the traffic to get through. They were coming from the downtown side, rather than from the way Freeman had come, but it was bad from both directions.

"*You:* set up a command post from those two squad cars in the street by the barricades. Get in touch with headquarters and *keep* in touch. We'll be relaying information and giving instructions all the time.

"You, you and you: circle the church and start looking for anything on the ground these robbers might have dropped. Find out where and how they got inside.

"You, you, you, you and you: get back to the people who were in the church. Keep them together. We haven't got enough men holding them.

"You and you: go to those cops over there and tell them to start taking names and addresses of anybody who was inside."

As Freeman churned out commands like a machine gun spewing bullets, uniformed cops left on the run to do as they were told. Sergeant Harris came running up.

"Sergeant, have you taken care of the bodies yet?"

"I've got 'em inside, Lieutenant."

"Guarded?"

"No, sir."

"See to it. Use only one man for it. We need every man we can get out here."

"Yes, sir!" Harris trotted away.

"You: take another man and go inside the church. Start looking around for any evidence left behind. But don't touch anything you find and keep these other people away.

"You: go find the minister." Freeman turned to Lindstadt, "What's his name, Mr. Mayor?"

"Parkhurst," Lindstadt said, trying to be helpful. He was impressed with the way Freeman was handling not only himself and the street cops, but the entire situation.

"Right." Freeman turned back to the uniformed cop. "Parkhurst. Go find this Parkhurst guy. Get notes on exactly what happened from him, from start to finish, but make it quick. Then report back to me. I'll need those notes when the brass from the Department get down here and start swinging their dicks around."

Freeman noticed that the uniformed man glanced over his shoulder at the mayor, but then he looked back to Freeman and saw in his eyes that he didn't have time to coddle the mayor. The cop turned and did as he was told.

Anyway, the sirens were getting closer now. Some men came back to make their initial reports, but Freeman gestured to them to wait.

"*You*: hop over to the command post, use my name, get plenty of coffee and sandwiches down here. Maybe we can get more out of some of these witnesses if we warm 'em up. We have to start taking statements. *MOVE!*

"*You*: tell Harris to start moving the people back *into* the church. They won't wanna go, but force 'em. It'll be warmer there and we'll keep 'em longer."

The sirens had made it through, and screamed into the night, their blue and red flashing lights digging ominously into the darkness. Freeman began to realize how cold he was. Moments later, Captain Alan Ferguson, C.O. of the Twenty-eighth Precinct, moved toward Freeman, who saw him coming.

"Freeman, how'd you get here so fast?"

"I was just above here when it happened, I guess. Heard it on the radio, Captain. Came right down."

"Good thinking."

There wasn't any thinking to it, thought Freeman.

"I've been very impressed with this detective, Captain," Lindstadt interjected.

Ferguson just now saw the mayor behind Freeman and his face filled with shock when he saw the condition the mayor was in.

"My God, Mr. Mayor, what did they do to you?"

"Not as much as they did to some of the others, Captain. Don't worry about me. I'll heal. What's your name?"

"Ferguson. Twenty-eighth."

"I've already met Lieutenant Freeman, here."

A uniformed cop came running up.

“Lieutenant, we’ve managed to get the mayor’s car brought up. It’s right over here.”

“Why don’t you get in your car, Mr. Mayor?” Freeman suggested. “You can get warm there until we can get you some first aid.”

“I’ll do that, but I’m not leaving here until we get this investigation under way. Because gentlemen,” he said with a sternness that impressed both Freeman and Ferguson, “we’re going to catch these fuckers and after we catch them we’re going to hang *’em by the balls!*”

Chapter 17

Freeman went over everything he'd done so far with Ferguson. They walked over to the command post set up between two squad cars. Ferguson's car and many others were now clustered around the command post, creating a Christmas tree effect with all the swirling, blinking, flashing lights. Within thirty minutes, there were upwards of one hundred additional personnel on the scene with more on the way, not to mention countless uniformed men and support personnel.

"What's that smell?" said Ferguson, wrinkling his nose.

Freeman could smell it, too. His right pants leg, just moments ago warm with his pee, now clung to his leg, wet and freezing.

"Beats me," he said.

As soon as he could, Freeman broke away from Ferguson and the command post.

He wanted to start talking to a few people himself. He had not had time to look over the scene or talk to anyone involved in the holdup. And he desperately wanted to do this. All he actually knew so far was still extremely limited:

A. There had been a robbery of the personal effects of the members and staff of Trinity Church.

B. Ten to fifteen people had been gunned down.

C. Between eight and fifteen men, depending on who you asked, executed the crime.

D. The men wore masks that looked like the face of Christ, and monks' robes.

Of course, he knew some of the details, but he needed more. He wanted to start with Parkhurst. Mike Harris brushed past him on his way to the command post to report.

"Hold it, Sarge. Where's this Parkhurst guy?"

Suddenly, an odd expression came over Harris's face.

“Lieutenant, I forgot to tell you something.”

“What do you mean?” Freeman demanded impatiently.

“Come with me, Lieutenant. You have to see something. It’s very, very bad. I don’t know how it happened.”

Harris turned and started up the stairs into the church.

“I had all the bodies collected inside, and—” his voice trailed off.

“*Shit!*” Freeman said through grinding teeth, grabbing Harris by the arm roughly and spinning him around. “Now, what *is* this?”

“It’s John McTaggart.”

“*What?*” he screwed his face up as he asked the question. He was lost.

“Dead.”

Freeman looked at him for a long second and blinked, trying to put two and three and a half together and get four. He abruptly pushed past Harris into the church and saw the bodies ranged in a line behind the last pew. He reviewed them carefully. About dozen bodies, some of them very messy and riddled with bullets.

Then he stopped.

At the end of the line was John’s body, the arms and legs in odd, angular positions Freeman naturally associated with violent death, but whose gracelessness and degradation he had never been able to accept. But it was the face: one eye was a large gaping hole of black, blue and dark red blood still in the ugly process of caking. The other eye—it still seemed like a good eye—was staring back at Freeman, wide open, startled, horrid, full of fear and sudden defenselessness. He had a “*What-happened?*” expression on his face, and you could almost hear the words as McTaggart looked, unseeing, into Freeman’s eyes. A silent scream came from his open mouth. The face looked like a rotten tomato had been thrown at the eye, spattering everything, right on target.

Only it hadn’t been a tomato.

“He was such a mess, at first I didn’t recog—”

“Shut up,” Freeman said with a soft intensity that didn’t conceal a basic anger chewing his gut. Harris nodded like a dumb ass and moved away.

Freeman stared at the body, not really thinking anything, but *feeling* everything at the same time.

What about Patricia? And the twins?

After three-quarters of a bottle of black Jack, he wasn’t just operating at ninety percent. He was hovering around the big one hundred mark.

Snap!

“*Sergeant!*” he called, going after Harris and catching him under the portals.

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant.”

“Right,” Freeman said quickly, as if he were discussing his sore feet or the cold piss on his pants. “What was he *doing* here?”

“Just stopped out of curiosity,” Harris shrugged. “That’s what he told me. He was on his way up to Big Dot’s to find you. Said your cell phone was off. Toughest damn luck, you know?” Harris shook his head sadly.

“Yeah, real shitty, all right. Real shitty. Okay, back to what you were doing.”

Chapter 18

Freeman went looking for Parkhurst, but couldn't find him in the church. When he went back outside, he saw Ferguson standing by the mayor's car as a couple of white-jackets administered first aid. The mayor's aides were cluck-clucking around His Honor like agitated chickens. Mrs. Lindstadt was in the back seat of the car, the mayor sitting in the back, too, but with his feet swung out through the open door onto the street. The motor was running so the heater would warm the car up a bit. The group had been joined by Gus Haffey, the commissioner, and his people. Freeman found himself thinking how happy he was that he wasn't a precinct commander or even worse, in the exalted position of police commissioner. When no one knew who you were, you had the closest thing to freedom available in life. Especially in New York.

The three big shots were an odd combination. Lindstadt with his nervous energy, a small, compact little man who fairly bristled with a *let's-get-something-done-about-this* energy that never seemed to taper off. It apparently appealed to the voters. His beetle-brows never slackened, his eyes were always squinting with intensity, his lips twisted into a serious frown.

Ferguson, Freeman's C.O., was just the opposite: an easy-going man, tall (six-four), and All-American basketball player (center) in college, sandy hair, still holding its color although Ferguson was fifty-two, a clean-scrubbed face, an easy smile, confident nature, friendly, an authoritarian because of his rank but not by nature. A fine man, but not a super cop.

Next to him Police Commissioner Augustus Haffey knelt at the mayor's knee, huddled in conference. Haffey was just over six feet, with reddish hair, brown freckles all over his wrinkled, experienced, fifty-eight-year old face. He could get so mad and scream so loud that any man with a token mind would lose himself in a crowd at the mere hint that Haffey was irritated. But he was a good man, passionate, extreme

in his likes and dislikes—a good cop who’d worked his way up from the street. He had a keen political side, which accounted for such an amazing career. Lindstadt had appointed him commissioner.

When Freeman finally found Parkhurst, he couldn’t tell him much more than anyone else who’d been inside during the holdup. The Jesus Christ masks, the machine pistols, the brutality, the ruthlessness, the enigmatic leader who held the other robbers together and handled everything with such finesse, the hymn-singing to cover any noises (like the gunfire), the obviously methodical, well-thought-out plan that—well, simply put, just went perfectly.

The crime was a mind boggler.

As Freeman finished with Parkhurst, Edward Quigley came over, and, looking at the others hesitantly, spoke bluntly to Parkhurst.

“We’re having a special meeting of the vestry the day after Christmas. We want you there.”

“You may rely on my presence.”

Quigley opened his mouth to say something more, thought better of it, and turned to go find his family.

At this point they saw Janie Parkhurst and other members of her group being led away by uniformed men and some detectives who were taking them to make brief statements. The demonstration had broken into bits with the first onrush of people from the church, but most of the participants were still lingering around, either to be questioned by the police, or hooked by curiosity. The demonstration had taken on the proportions of small potatoes by now, completely insignificant.

Freeman watched as Parkhurst and his daughter exchanged long looks, but neither’s face softened. No words passed between them. Parkhurst’s expression showed the pain he felt, the awful degradation of the robbery. You could tell he took it personally, like a hard slap in the face.

The police routines proceeded, more units arrived and orders flowed steadily down the chain of command (that made all police

forces function properly) from Haffey and Ferguson and the inspectors gathered at the command post near the mayor's car.

Then Richard Whitney, who was standing nearby, asked Parkhurst something that seemed to Freeman about the most unimportant thing in the world.

"Father Parkhurst, what should I tell people about services tomorrow?"

Parkhurst did not hesitate in answering.

"Tell them services will be held promptly as usual. No exceptions. Make that firm and clear."

"Yes, Father."

"Excuse me, Lieutenant," Parkhurst said, offering a slight but polite bow, "I'm available anytime you require me."

"Thanks, Mr. Parkhurst. I'll probably have a lot more later on—when the dust settles."

Parkhurst smiled weakly and moved away, climbing the steps up the front of the church. Freeman and Whitney watched him. As the top of the steps, Parkhurst turned, his long vestments flowing in the stiff, inhospitably cold, made more intense by the brisk wind. He obviously was looking on the tangled scene below. A sad, resigned shake of the head before he turned and disappeared within.

"He's going back to his chambers to disrobe," Whitney said, looking after the rector with genuine, unadorned affection and respect.

"Like him, don't you?" Freeman said, sliding a Winston from his pack.

"Very much."

"I noticed everybody doesn't seem to get along so well around here, though."

Whitney looked at him and frowned.

"You mean Ed Quigley. That's understating it."

"Overstatement's my specialty. Just ask my chief," Freeman smiled. "What's behind all the heat?"

Whitney explained the situation: the dissatisfaction with the vestry ever since Parkhurst's daughter began the Front, how the great deal of media attention focused on Janie Parkhurst adversely affected the public image of the church, the decline in revenues.

Blah, blah, blah.

"I knew about all that. I read the papers, too, you know. The *Times*, even. But ... is that it?" Freeman shrugged.

"That's it, Lieutenant. Isn't it enough? People are starting not to like Father Parkhurst anymore."

"They're taking sides?"

"Yes."

"They really blame him for his daughter because she turned out to be a dyke?"

Whitney gave him a pained look.

"People in Trinity Church are pretty sensitive to things like that, Lieutenant."

"Meaning I'm not, I suppose."

"Let's just say they hold Father Parkhurst accountable for the church's reputation. He is the one who has to maintain it."

"Too bad he's having such a tough time of it," said Freeman, shaking his head.

"Yes, it's very bad for him."

"And adding the robbery to everything else?"

"Yes. It's not his fault, of course, but it reflects badly on him. After all, he is the rector."

"A lot of tough breaks."

"Yes."

"And it's Christmas," Freeman couldn't help a little sardonic laugh. Whitney looked up at him sharply.

"He's the most prominent clergyman in the Diocese. He ought to be bishop."

"And the bishop knows it?" Freeman asked.

“Everybody knows it, especially Father Parkhurst.”

Chapter 19

Freeman went over to see Randolph Gerard, who was getting blood transfusions by white-jackets. He was unconscious, and they were working to stabilize him until they could get him into an ambulance.

Parkhurst had mentioned to Freeman the incident at the rail involving the bonds, and that Gerard claimed the bonds were his. Freeman's ears had perked up on hearing about the bonds. This added an unforeseen wrinkle to the entire crime. A layer that made it much more interesting to Freeman.

Mrs. Gerard eyes were still wet from weeping. A uniformed woman cop was holding her, trying to calm her down, and she'd been given a shot to tranquilize her.

Through her sobs, he got the story. A Charles Kolsnar who worked for Gerard, Nugent & Company apparently had embezzled some \$200 million in bonds, been brought into the church by the Gerards, trapped there when the church was sealed off, and had the bonds taken from him along with everything else. Freeman had to smile when he heard all of this, and the irony of it made him wonder what this Kolsnar character must be thinking of the whole escapade. The \$200 million considerably upped the entire take. This Trinity case had suddenly become *very* big: multiple-homicides, embezzlement, robbery, conspiracy, etc., and probably illegal parking for the getaway car(s).

"Lieutenant Freeman, you'll want to talk to two men we've got over here."

The uniformed man took him over to the two ushers who'd been forced into the church just prior to the robbery by a man dressed like them. As far as Freeman could learn at this point, this impostor was the only one of the gang not wearing a mask. He would have to get these two men to go through the mug books to find this mysterious "usher."

As he continued questioning the two ushers, he saw his friend Rafaela Salguero, as assistant medical examiner, come up the steps into the church.

Salguero was in her mid-thirties, and one of the best criminologists in the world. She was the “sexy Latina” from Miami, half Cuban and half El Salvadoran. She was 5’9”, slender in build, had thick wavy black hair you couldn’t wait to run your fingers through. An olive complexion and seductive black eyes completed the package.

“I’ll be right back,” Freeman told the ushers. “Don’t go away.”

He went over to Salguero, who saw him and smiled.

“Pretty nasty business,” Salguero said.

“Yeah.”

“I want to see the bodies before the boys take ’em downtown and we start cutting.”

She wrinkled her nose.

“What’s that smell?”

“The bodies are over there,” Freeman nodded, his hands in his pockets. Salguero started to move in that direction. “McTaggart’s one of them.”

Salguero turned, her face fallen.

“No.”

Freeman nodded.

“’Fraid so.”

“Shit. He was a good kid.”

“Yeah,” Freeman said.

“Why was he here? He wasn’t on to something, was he?”

“No, don’t think so. Couldn’t have been. Nobody was.”

“Aw, shit,” said Salguero, her nose wrinkling up toward her eyes. She was taking it pretty badly. “That’s terrible, Amos.”

“Pretty shitty, huh?” Freeman mumbled.

“Yeah,” said Salguero, sadly. Suddenly, she snapped at him: “Get out of here, Freeman, and let me do my job.”

She didn't fool Freeman. He didn't say anything more, but turned and went back to the ushers. Something was bothering him, nagging him, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Something about McTaggart. Something so painfully obvious that it was eluding his conscious mind. Sergeant Harris was talking to the ushers when he got back.

"Now let me get this straight. The guy out front all the time while the service was going on was the same guy that pulled a gun on you and forced you inside before things got going?"

The ushers nodded as one.

Harris turned to Freeman.

"Why, that's the guy I talked to outside."

"You *talked* to him?" Freeman asked.

"Sure."

"Well, good. That'll be another eye looking at the mugs."

"Sure I talked to him. When I came up to the doors. A man and his family were trying to get inside and this usher kept telling them no because of the fire limits, and the TV people were asking him about the demonstra—"

Harris stopped cold.

Freeman's eyes lit up. He took his hands out of his pockets, forgetting the cold.

"They had a *camera* on him?"

Harris bobbed his head up and down dumbly, and an excited smile broke across his face.

"For cryin' out loud," Freeman muttered, already moving away.

With Harris following, Freeman went running down the steps and into the mass of people, beyond into the tangled traffic and crowd of people on Broadway. On the sidewalk opposite was the news crew, making its live reports from that distance, kept there by two men in uniform. The reporter was in the middle of a live broadcast. Freeman signaled him to cut it short.

“And we will continue bringing you updates on this amazing story of robbery and murder as we learn more facts. This is Brian Anderson, WNBC News, at Trinity Church in the financial district.”

The light died slowly, whining down, and the reporter turned to Freeman.

“What can we do for you, Lieutenant?” The tone wasn’t friendly.

“This is important, Anderson. You interviewed the usher during the service, that right?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, the usher was one of the gang.”

The reporter’s sarcastic tone was a thing of the distant past.

“*He was one of them?*” Anderson dipped his head and started snapping his fingers, trying to recall something. He looked up with stars in his eyes. “*John Fletcher!* That’s it. That’s the name he gave.”

“I’m not worried about the name he gave. Where’s the fucking *tape*, man?”

“We transmit directly to the studio, Lieutenant,” Anderson explained. “We transmit live and they take what they need in the studio.”

The sound man butted in.

“I’ve got a direct line to the studio, Lieutenant. Why don’t you talk to the producer?”

Freeman glanced over his shoulder at the command post across the street. About fifty men were jammed together around it. He turned to the sound man and nodded. If he handled it himself, things would move faster.

“Mobile one, mobile one ...”

When the studio answered, Freeman got on the line.

“This is Lieutenant Freeman, NYPD Homicide, at Trinity Church.”

“This is Juan Penudo,” came the answer.

“You know the situation here at Trinity?”

"I've been keeping up on it. What's the trouble? Why'd you push our crew outta there?" Penudo was pissed.

"Take it easy, Juan. I'm the cop. Let me ask the questions, okay? Don't worry about your boys. I'll turn 'em loose in a minute. They can do whatever they want. But I need help."

Freeman explained the situation to Penudo.

"We won't destroy anything. If they shot it in the field, we'll have it here."

"Did you destroy any of the footage?"

"Sure," laughed Penudo. "Some of it we throw out right away. Anderson always transmits about ten times more than we need. Likes to see his face on the tube."

Freeman glanced at Anderson, who was frowning.

"Just kidding," Penudo added.

"Good, we'll get a couple of people down there to help you, and I'll be back in touch with you, Juan. Save anything with that usher, okay?"

"Lieutenant, it's yours."

"One more thing, Juan."

"Yeah?"

"You can't broadcast that you've got this guy on tape, okay?"

"C'mon, Lieutenant. You're asking me to hold a story like *that*?"

"Juan, I'm not asking, I'm telling. I ought to get it cleared for you by morning. That's the best I can do. We want to see this guy before he sees himself."

"Hell, if *he* knows he was filmed, who are you keeping it from?"

"True, Juan. But you ever stop to think of the rest of his gang that don't know he was filmed? You want my job? Listen, call it regulations, call it police pressure, call it a crock of shit for all I care, but don't put it out till you get something cleared by my bosses. We got the mayor here. He'll have plenty to say about this. Maybe you can run it by morning."

"All right, Lieutenant."

"Thanks, Juan. I owe you a cup of coffee."

"I want a *café con leche* served in Florida."

Freeman nodded with a smile, handing off to the sound man, shaking his head.

"Hell, I think I *will* buy the son of a bitch a cup of coffee."

"What about us, Lieutenant?" Anderson asked.

"Do what you want, but keep out of our way. Fair?"

"Fair *enough*," said Anderson a little more tersely than Freeman would have liked to hear.

Fucking generous is what it is, thought Freeman as he crossed the street back to the command post. A high-rolling lump of big wheels in city government and the department was now milling around the mayor's car and the squad cars arranged in a rough, angular circle that made Freeman think of covered wagons preparing to defend the camp against an Indian assault. He recognized the deputy mayor, two deputy inspectors, a chief inspector, two deputy commissioners and three precinct commanders. He wasn't sure who was running things.

Probably nobody, he thought.

He spotted Commissioner Haffey leave the chief and his deputies and go over to the mayor's car where Lindstadt was telling Deputy Mayor Marlton about the robbery. Freeman walked over behind Haffey.

"Excuse me, Commissioner?"

"Yeah?" Haffey whirled around, surprised.

"Who do we make our reports to?"

Haffey looked over Freeman's shoulder. "Chief Fowler," he called, gesturing.

Chief Inspector Joseph Fowler came over. But Lindstadt looked up, displeased.

"Make your report to the Commissioner, Freeman. I want to hear it."

Haffey looked around at the mayor, then back to Freeman, surprise filling his face.

“Who are you?”

“Freeman, Homicide, Twenty-eighth.”

“He was the first detective here, Gus. Was doing a good job, too, until the rest of you got here and screwed everything up.”

“*Report,*” Haffey ordered, his voice unemotionally professional, but the effect he was trying to create was too strained. His freckles got darker, and his anger was showing through. By now, Chief Fowler was standing next to them with tight lips, as well as Captain Ferguson, who’d come over with the chief. They’d heard Lindstadt’s remark, too, and there was some natural testiness arising from Lindstadt’s suddenly high opinion of Detective Lieutenant Amos Freeman.

“We got a lucky break, Commissioner. I’ve talked to the two head ushers. Just before the robbery, they were forced inside by a man with a gun dressed in a dark suit and wearing a carnation. He was one of the robbers. He sealed off the front of the church and pretended to be an usher. He kept everybody else out.”

“So? What’s so important about it?” Ferguson asked, trying to knock Freeman down a notch or two, but with a friendly, patronizing smile on his face.

You should learn to shut the fuck up when you don’t know what you’re fucking talking about, thought Freeman, but it wasn’t his place to say that.

“It’s obvious, Captain,” said Chief Fowler, a bear of a man with a pot belly and granny glasses covering pinhead eyes, smothered on his face by his fat cheeks, but an excellent cop. “The fake usher wasn’t wearing a mask. The ushers can identify him, Freeman?”

“Yes, sir, but there’s more. The WNBC News crew interviewed the guy and have him on tape.”

Fowler’s little eyes seemed to grow a hundred times their usual size. He turned and barked over his shoulders.

“Johnny, call WNBC and—”

“Chief, I already did that. They have a direct line to the station. I thought it would be quicker than going through the command post. I’ve got the station manager going through all their tape and he’ll weed out everything with this usher on it.”

“Good, Freeman.”

“*Good?*” interrupted Lindstadt, warming with every word, enthusiastic and excited. “*Excellent! That’s what it is! Excellent!*”

Haffey clapped him on the shoulder.

“The mayor’s right, Lieutenant. That was quick thinking.”

“Listen, everybody. I want you to be at my house tomorrow morning for a meeting. I know it’s Christmas Day, but your families will have to understand. We’re going to organize this investigation. Gus, see that all the senior people are there.”

“Yes, Mr. Mayor. How’s ten o’clock?”

“Make it two o’clock, on second thought. You can have the morning with your families. Chief Fowler, too.”

“Yes, sir.”

Fowler had already left to take more reports. Ferguson took Freeman by the arm as he was turning away from the huddle around the mayor’s car.

“Sir?”

“I heard about McTaggart, Amos. Sorry.”

But Lindstadt overheard them and butted in.

“*Captain? Who’s McTaggart?*”

Nothing slips past this guy, thought Freeman.

“Detective third grade John McTaggart of my precinct. He was trained by Lieutenant Freeman, and he was killed here tonight.”

“*By the robbers?*” Lindstadt’s eyes were huge.

“Yes, sir.”

“Was he in the church? I thought Freeman was the first detective here.”

“I looked into it when I found out about it,” said Ferguson. “He was on his way back to the precinct house from Brooklyn Bridge where they found a body—somebody Freeman was looking for. Apparently, he just stopped by here to see what was going on and was here when the robbers made their getaway. They got him—cold and clean.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your friend, Freeman,” Lindstadt said in an unusually quiet voice. “I know it means more to you than you allow us to see. I didn’t know the man, of course, but please accept my condolences?”

Maybe that’s why guys like you get elected, thought Freeman. They could sound so *sincere* when they wanted to. But he cursed himself for being a dickhead. The mayor seemed to really mean it.

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate that.”

When Freeman was finally clear of the command post, it finally jumped into his mind. Ferguson said it. What he had said was wrong, but what he had said about the robbers shooting John didn’t add up. That was what had been bothering him all night:

Who the fuck shot John McTaggart?

Chapter 20

From what he'd learned, Freeman knew all the robbers left down a stairwell that led to the back of the church, *not the front!* Ferguson hadn't put it all together yet. John had been out front—on the street with Mike Harris. And no one seemed to catch this point but him. The rest of them hadn't thought it through completely.

Rafaela Salguero was watching some white-jackets remove the bodies. A couple of dozen were hovering over the dead, zipping them up in body bags, hoisting them onto gurneys, taking them down the steps to the ambulances and vans squeezed out front. The first to go was Randolph Gerard, but he wasn't dead yet, if the white-jacket holding the IV over the gurney meant anything.

"Pretty grim," Salguero said as Freeman came close.

"Yeah, I saw earlier. Pretty grim, all right."

Freeman nodded toward Gerard. "Anything special about that guy over there? The one they're taking out now. Randolph Gerard's his name."

"He's pretty weak. Single slug in the tummy. Don't know anything till we get it out of him. Why?"

"Something's bothering me. About McTaggart. He was shot out front. The robbers left through the back. Who shot him?"

"I see what you mean. And you're wondering if the robbers shot Gerard, is that it?"

"Yeah, see you later."

"Right," Salguero called after him. "Let me know, all right?"

Freeman said over his shoulder, "Let's get together for a Cuban dinner, Rafa. I've been wantin' some black beans and rice."

"Sure."

"I'll call you."

Freeman followed the gurney out to the ambulance and took Mrs. Gerard gently by the arm.

“Mrs. Gerard?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry to bother you now, but has another officer talked to you besides me?”

“No.”

That was interesting in itself. Out of the more than three hundred cops on the block, no one had taken a statement from Mrs. Gerard. He realized he should have paid her more attention earlier, but he got derailed onto something else.

“I’ve got to get something clear. I hope you don’t mind answering a few questions.”

“No, go ahead.” she said wearily. She was still an emotional wreck.

“Exactly when was your husband shot? Was it during the robbery along with the others that were wounded?”

“No, the robbers didn’t shoot him. They were all gone. My husband was running after Charlie Kolsnar.”

“This was *after* the robbers left?”

“Yes. As soon as they were gone—and they all went down the spiral staircase by the sanctuary—everyone ran for the doors at the back of the church to get out. Charlie jumped ahead of us and my husband said, ‘I’ve got to stop him, Ginny, no matter what,’ and ran after him. I tried my best to keep up with him, but I couldn’t. The crush of people was too great. I lost sight of him in a flash. I didn’t actually *hear* a shot, but there had to be one. It was *so* noisy,” she raised her hand to her forehead, remembering the noise and terror. “I couldn’t really hear. When I got to the first doors—the glass ones inside—I glanced to my left and saw my husband’s legs behind one of the doors. I recognized his shoes. They’re Italian, you know.”

“Italian, yes,” he said deferentially. *Jesus!* he thought. “So it was *Kolsnar* who shot him?”

“It had to be.”

“Did you know he had a gun on him?”

“I didn’t think about it at the time, of course, with so much going on, but the agents in his department—he was chief of the Bond Security Division at Gerard, Nugent—they all carry guns. I didn’t think he’d be carrying one on Christmas Eve, but then he *was* stealing two hundred million dollars.”

“Why do you suppose he didn’t use the gun against the robbers?”

That was a stupid question, he realized immediately, worthy of Captain Ferguson, and he answered it himself:

“It’s obvious. Kolsnar didn’t have a chance—one man with a handgun against all that firepower. And then, after he shot your husband, he left through the front doors, just like everyone else.”

“He had to, because it would have been impossible for him to fight against the crowd and come back towards me.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Gerard. You’ve been very helpful. I’ll be checking on your husband—and you. I hope he pulls through.”

“Thank you, dear.”

And thank you! He just *had* to talk to Gerard—if he pulled through.

He helped Mrs. Gerard into the ambulance and watched as it made its way through the narrow lane the traffic cops had cleared for it.

He didn’t know everything about John’s death, and he was smart enough to know he never would. But he could guess, God damn it!

As Kolsnar came out of the front doors, McTaggart must have seen something, or been attracted by the way in which Kolsnar moved. Or maybe he even saw Kolsnar shoot Gerard, though that didn’t seem credible to Freeman. Anyway, McTaggart must have seen—*something*. And, whatever it was, it was enough for John to draw his service revolver (Harris had said it was in his hand when they found him). And that was enough for Kolsnar to have to kill him to make a clean getaway.

Freeman tried to get on this Kolsnar guy’s wavelength. What had he planned if he hadn’t run into the Gerards outside the church? \$200

million was “leave-the-country” kind of money. So he’d have a reservation, maybe even in his own name, to a safe haven. Now the question was, would he still run? Would he still run now that he was wanted for murdering a cop, and now that his embezzlement scheme was no more than the warm piss on Freeman’s pants leg: turned cold in the wind?

Big question.

No answer.

Yet.

Freeman made his report to Chief Inspector Fowler, giving him all the background. Lindstadt had gotten out of his car and was hanging around the command post, his arm in a sling, his face patched with white bandages. He listened attentively as Freeman reported.

“We’ve got a hundred detectives here, and the rest of these people are talking to the janitors while Freeman here finds out what’s really going on. *Beautiful!*” He raised his good arm to heaven sarcastically.

Freeman could tell from the veiled expressions on the faces of the department’s brass that they wished the mayor would jump down a manhole and leave them alone to do their jobs. Freeman was also sure his superior officers would just as soon he himself go jump in the Hudson River and stop making them look like assholes.

Chief Fowler meanwhile had picked up a radio mike.

“This is Chief Fowler. Check all international flights for a reservation in the name of Charles, uh.” He looked at Freeman.

“Kolsnar. K-o-l-s-n-a-r.”

“Charles Kolsnar. K-o-l-s-n-a-r. If he shows, tell customs to pick him up, hold for us. Armed, very dangerous. Wanted for murder and embezzlement. And get an APB out on him right away.”

“Yes, Chief,” came the tinny reply over the speaker.

“And let’s get a rundown on this man. Works as chief of the Bond Security Division of Gerard, Nugent and Company, Wall Street.”

Freeman inched his way out of the command area, thinking about Kolsnar. Wouldn’t hurt to try. He’d have done the same thing the chief

did, but he knew it wouldn't produce anything. He knew the chief knew it, too, but, like most of the shit they did, it had to be done, just to cover their asses. Freeman knew he'd have to find out more about Kolsnar before he could start second-guessing him, but if the man had any guts—and he proved tonight he did—he *might* try to get the bonds back, and go into hiding until the right time came and he found out who took the bonds from him. Or did Kolsnar have enough money already secreted away that he didn't need the \$200 million he lost tonight?

And let's not forget that the robbers would have to find someone to take the bonds off their hands.

Someday.

Eventually.

Chances were pretty good this Kolsnar would know all the people in that line of work. The shady black market business involving bonds and other securities.

This would have to go on the back burner for a while. But eventually, Amos Freeman knew he would have to come to know this Charles Kolsnar very intimately.

Chapter 21

Kolsnar was, at this very moment, just two blocks away, walking through the front door of Gerard, Nugent & Company as if he owned the place.

“I forgot a couple of things, Harry,” Kolsnar smiled as he walked past the guard.

“Sure thing, Mr. Kolsnar. How’d you make it through that traffic on Broadway?”

“Took forever. What’s going on down there, anyway?”

“We heard over the TV the church was robbed. You believe it? Robbed and some people killed. Machine guns. On Christmas Eve. And we’re just two blocks away.”

“Where’s Belmondo?” Kolsnar asked of the other guard, the one who was usually behind the rows of CCTV camera units behind the desk.

“Went down to Trinity to have a look-see. I’m watching it here on the TV.”

“Ah,” said Kolsnar. *I have to hurry!*

“It’s amazing what goes on right under your nose, isn’t it?”

“I’ll say.”

“There’s no respect for anything anymore.”

“I’ll just sign in,” Kolsnar said, scratching his name—for what he knew would be the very last time—into the after-hours book. “Have Belmondo log me in the computer when he gets back,” he said, trying not to look too hurried as he walked toward the bank of elevators. He could hear Brian Anderson’s voice on the TV as he rounded a corner out of Harry’s site, took off his shoes so they wouldn’t make sounds on the marble floors, and ran to the elevators.

Harry went behind the desk and watched the live coverage up at Trinity coming over WNBC.

Kolsnar went right to his office, unlocked it, went in and opened his safe. Inside was a packet marked, “Petty Cash—BSD Operations.”

As chief of the Bond Security Division, Kolsnar had as one of his responsibilities this \$50,000 petty cash fund which he issued to his agents in emergency, special or secret situations later reviewed and approved by the board in executive session. Kolsnar would issue money at his own discretion to his subordinate agents, mark down the reason or the job to which the agent was assigned, and the agent would later turn in his expenses.

Kolsnar unceremoniously ripped open the packet, threw out the vouchers and other paperwork, and pulled out what was left of the money. There was a little over thirty grand in crisp C-notes. He stuffed the money into his inside pockets, spreading it out as evenly over his body as he could, and raced back for the elevator.

He had taken a big chance coming back to the office—he knew this—but the odds still seemed to favor him. As on a very delicate assignment, everything now depended on timing. And the timing was on his side. He didn’t know what damage he’d done to Gerard or the guy with the drawn gun out in front of the church—he assumed because he had drawn a weapon it was a plainclothes cop—but he might have killed both of them. Soon the word would be out, and they would come looking. He had a short period of grace—maybe the better part of a day—and he decided to use it to his advantage. Thirty grand—now that he had it—would be a big help.

As the elevator doors opened on the lobby, Kolsnar heard the TV, louder now. The weather was on. He walked casually toward the entrance. Harry saw him coming and got up from a seat next to Belmondo’s behind the monitors and came around, pulling his keys out on a chain that wound into a small box on his belt like a tape measure, and started sifting through them to find the one that fit the front door.

“Sign me out, will you, Belmondo?”

“Sure thing, Mr. Kolsnar.”

"I don't think I'll try Broadway going back," Kolsnar said.

"Must be a mess out there," said Harry.

"It is. Ambulances, police cars—a real pain in the ass."

Harry inserted the key and started to turn.

"We have a bulletin from police headquarters," the urgent voice of Brian Anderson blurted, "in connection with the Trinity Church robbery and massacre that occurred tonight..."

Harry instinctively stopped turning the key and looked over his shoulder to Belmondo, glued to the TV.

"Wonder what—?"

"Harry, I'm in a hurry. I've got—"

"... the police have issued an all points bulletin for Charles Kolsnar, chief of the Bond Security Division of the respected firm of Gerard, Nugent and Company of Wall Street. No reason has been attached to this, and it is not known what connection he has to the actual robbery tonight. Kolsnar is armed and dangerous and is to be treated..."

Harry's mouth dropped open. His hands were still on his key in the front door. By the time he looked into Kolsnar's eyes, Kolsnar had backed up and had his gun out.

Without a word, he shot Harry once in the side, turned quickly and got Belmondo in the chest one time before he could even begin to reach for his gun, then swung around and shot Harry again, then the other guard once more as he and his chair clattered to the floor, the echo from the shots bouncing off the marble walls of the cavernous lobby.

That finished them both.

Harry was hanging by his key chain, which had spun out to its farthest length. But the chain was strong and did not break. Harry's body formed an upside-down U, his waist at the top, and swung back and forth slightly, dangling from the chain, his arms down over his head. His face registered no pain at all, just complete, amazed shock, surprise, disbelief.

He died, Kolsnar thought, thinking how wrong Brian Anderson must have been.

The massive doors were made of glass and Kolsnar had no time to think of anything but escape. Somebody could walk by at any second and see what he had done. He tried, but couldn't, turn the key—Harry's weight was pulling too hard on the chain. Kolsnar raised his leg and gave Harry's frail body a savage kick downward on the torso, snapping the chain and cracking a few of Harry's ribs. He heard a soft groan come from Harry as he fell to the polished marble floor. Kolsnar still had his gun in his hand. He put another round into Harry's head, and then one into Belmondo's for good measure. Then he turned the key and ran outside. He could plainly see the confusion reigning up on Broadway. The other way—down Wall Street—was clear of activity—and this was the way he now ran for his life.

Chapter 22

Twenty minutes later, Rafaela Salguero and Freeman were standing (and freezing) near the command post eating chicken salad sandwiches and gulping down good hot coffee.

“Not like the Cuban coffee in Miami,” said Rafa.

“Hey, shut up. It’s hot.”

Headquarters was calling the command post at Trinity, requesting a routine check be made at Gerard, Nugent & Company. An automatic alarm had gone off when the firm’s guards did not punch in at their regular security checkpoints.

Freeman heard the communications operator tell Chief Fowler about the request.

“You hear that, Rafa?”

“Sure I heard it. What am I? Deaf? So what?”

“It’s Randolph Gerard’s God damn company, that’s so what.”

Salguero looked up.

“The tie-in with this Kolsnar man you were telling me about, yeah.”

Freeman went over. Chief Fowler was fast. He’d made the connection himself and called for Ferguson, who was now coming up.

“Captain, take Lieutenant Freeman along and run down to Gerard, Nugent. The guards didn’t punch in. I’m concerned.”

“Yes, Chief. Ready, Freeman?”

“Yes, sir.” He turned to Salguero. “Rafaela, I have a hunch we’ll need a doctor.”

“Sure, I’ll come along,” she nodded, tossing a soggy chicken sandwich into the street.

They piled into a car driven by a uniformed cop and whisked briskly down an empty Wall Street two long blocks to the building which housed Gerard, Nugent.

The door was not locked and the bodies were just inside, quite visible from the street.

“*My God!*” Ferguson exclaimed when he saw the dead guards. “There might be someone in here.” He called to the uniformed man to order another two units. “We’ll search the building.”

“He’s gone, Captain.”

“Who?” Ferguson was confused.

“Charles Kolsnar,” Freeman smiled, looking almost with contentment at the two bodies. They were proof Charles Kolsnar was more than a myth. He’d chased too many myths in his time.

Other units arrived and a thorough search of the building was made. Freeman took part in it, even though he knew nothing would be found until they could get an inventory of Charlie’s office.

How do you like that? I’m already on a first-name basis with you, you son of a bitch.

He headed directly for the Bond Security Division, looking at the directory to find the right office suite. Charlie’s door was open, not locked, showing Freeman that Kolsnar had no further use for the niceties of office life. Freeman found the packet marked “Petty Cash—BSD Operations” on Charlie’s desk, and sat down with the paperwork for a few minutes. He quickly figured out that Charlie had taken a little over \$30,000 in cold cash with him, even though he must have had a bundle on him.

(No, wait! Ginny Gerard had told him he threw thousands of dollars in cash into the robbers’ basket when they were unloading their possessions, so he really was broke.)

It had been worth the risk to come back, Freeman figured. Charlie counted on the cops being so confused two blocks away that he could get away without too much trouble. Freeman still wondered why Kolsnar had had to shoot two guards who had apparently let him in freely enough. *I’ll have to ask Charlie about that*, he thought to himself. And now that he had the money—thirty g’s was a lot of petty cash where Freeman came from—would Charlie split for the Far East? He knew

that \$30,000 wouldn't go very far for a guy who'd been counting on \$200 million, minus the middleman's substantial commission.

When the cops reassembled in the foyer and Ferguson was satisfied that the building was clean, he assigned a four-man squad to guard the building overnight. He gave them strict instructions not to permit even high company officials in the building until further order from the commissioner.

Freeman met Salguero in the foyer and they left the building together, fighting against the cold wind slamming down Wall Street to get back to the car.

"Two more," Salguero said. "Jesus! What a night!"

"I'll bet you the bullets in those guards came from the same gun that killed John and shot Gerard."

"You sound very certain, Amos. Kolsnar must have a lot of guts coming back to his fucking office at this particular moment."

"He *has* plenty of guts, Rafa. Don't doubt it. And he had to come back for something. Or he wouldn't have."

Freeman explained about the money.

"But couldn't it have been one of the people who worked for Kolsnar and knew about the money?"

"And the combination to the safe in his office?"

"Didn't think of that."

"Anyway, I know it was Kolsnar."

"How?"

"I looked in the after-hours book. Charles Kolsnar signed in about forty-five minutes before we got the call."

"What time did he sign out?" Salguero asked.

Freeman watched from the warmth of a squad car as an ambulance team took the dead guards away on gurneys.

"When you establish the time of death of those two poor fucking assholes. That's when he signed out."

Chapter 23

It was a long time before Freeman got away for home.

He'd had to retrace his steps uptown where he'd pulled his car over and left it to run the rest of the way down to Trinity.

When he got there, he opened the door that he never locked and saw that someone had stolen all but one of the presents he'd bought for his family.

"Fuckin' losers," he said to himself as he crawled in.

He pulled out his cell phone and called Patricia McTaggart. Earlier, he'd left messages, but had had no response.

Much earlier in the evening, he'd asked Chief Fowler if he could get away to visit Patricia to give her the bad news about John.

"No. I need you here, Freeman. I'm sending a couple of other guys."

"He used to be my partner, Chief."

"No, Freeman."

"I'm really close to her and the kids."

Fowler paused as he looked at Freeman closely.

"The answer for the third and final time, Freeman, is No."

The other end rung a few times, and then went to voicemail.

Patricia's phone was off. There would be no talking to her tonight.

He drove crosstown and took the Brooklyn Bridge on his way home. Along the way, he thought of John McTaggart, Charlie Kolsnar, the Gerards, Father Parkhurst, even Bobby Dakers, whose body had been found under the bridge earlier that night.

And one or two million other things.

And, for as little time as there was left of tonight, he knew he could sleep, no matter who'd been killed. He was whipped. The liquor in him was long since burned out. He couldn't even remember those drinks at Big Dot's. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

He drove slowly down his street. It was late, very late, quiet, lonely, the street was deserted. The kind of street on which he'd ordinarily be

extraordinarily cautious *because* things were so quiet. His mind was still professional, still a cop's mind, still thinking of all the possibilities and of the dangers in each shadow, behind each parked car. But his body was just on its way home to bed, like any other working Joe after a killer day grinding away on the job.

He pulled into his driveway, parking the late model Ford (green, they gave him an unmarked *green* car; hell, his wife had a green Ford just like his) behind his wife's car, and his parents' car. He hated his Ford, he hated his wife's Ford, he hated *all* Fords, but she'd wanted a green Ford just like his, and dammed if she didn't get it. He told Angie over and over she'd been sorry. She should get a Chevy, much better, much better. After all that happened tonight, the only thing Freeman was thinking about as he went up the walkway to his house was how Ford *or* Chevys didn't have the little vent windows they used to have—great if you smoked—you could always flick your ash out of that little vent window. (His dad once had a car like that.) But, his mind shrugged, even without the vent windows, a Chevy was still the better car by far. They were always better. Try to change a spark plug on a Ford. That's all, just fuckin' try!

Where was his mind going?

In the front window of Freeman's house some Christmas lights were strung. They were still blinking on and off gaily as he went into the darkened living room. He switched them off. The house was quiet, not a sound. And nothing was stirring, not even a mouse, he thought muddily to himself.

His wife and the others had been decorating the house for days. Taped to the wall by the stairs leading up was a familiar salutation:

M-e-r-r-y C-h-r-i-s-t-m-a-s!

... spelled out in red letters with white edging and fake snow sprayed around them.

Freeman looked at the letters and shook his head slowly.

Tomorrow he'd have to go by and see Patricia McTaggart. And the two boys, Patrick and Speedy. He knew it wouldn't be an easy meeting—for a lot of reasons. He also knew John had been driving crosstown to see him. He'd had those messages on his cell phone. Calls he hadn't bothered to return.

Amos didn't have to dig too deep to hit the well of betrayal he knew was deep within him. All the bad things he'd done to John, whether John knew it or not. And John had been his best friend.

The image of John's ugly dead face flooded wet and blurry into his mind. He could not hear the silent scream coming from it, but he could see and *feel* it there nonetheless.

And it made Freeman scream silently to himself:

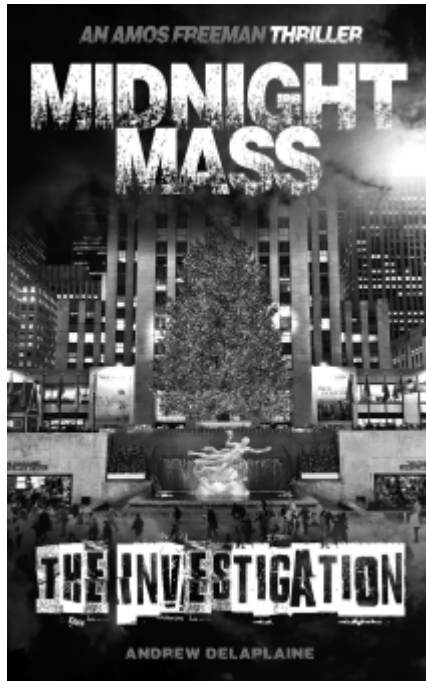
Oh, God. God Almighty. Where do I go from here?

*15 January 2015
Black Kitty Cottage
South Beach*

Continued in...

MIDNIGHT MASS

The Investigation



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1

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