

# ***MIDNIGHT MASS***

## ***The Investigation***

An Amos Freeman Thriller

*Andrew Delaplaine*

### ***Series Reading Order***

Midnight Mass: The Crime

Midnight Mass: The Investigation

Midnight Mass: The Break

Midnight Mass: The Chase



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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.**

# Chapter 1

## *Christmas Day – 10:38 A.M.*

Amos Freeman opened one eye to see who was shoving his shoulder. It was Angie. She was sitting up in bed, but still looked blurry to Freeman.

Between shoves she hissed the word “Amos,” which he found damned inconsiderate. He never realized how ugly his name was.

*Amos.*

He closed his eye.

*Ah, that feels better.*

It was all too bizarre to bother with right now.

But the shoving and hissing continued and Freeman finally resigned himself to the commencement of another interesting day in the life of a New York City cop. He felt as if he'd been asleep a long time—maybe four minutes. He raised his nose in the direction of the shoving. Then, bravely, he opened both eyes.

Just-like-that the shoving ceased.

To be replaced by a flood of words.

“*Amos, where were you last night?*” Angie said, the words somehow managing to wriggle through his fogged mind and be recorded as *heard*. The tone registered, too: hurt, pain, anger, irritation.

Etc.

“You *promised* you'd be home by midnight. We were all waiting for you.”

The word “promise” should be stricken from the dictionary. Forever.

“You know, it's only Christmas Eve once a year...”

*Praise God for that!*

“... and I think it's the least you could do ...”

Etc.

Angie was getting blurrier and blurrier the longer he looked at her. He decided to try again, closed his eyes, dipped his face into the pillow, raised it again, opened the old peepers.

She was still there, blessedly quiet for a moment, obviously looking at him with a thin-lipped frown.

*"Where were you?"*

He groaned somewhere inside and hoisted himself up on an elbow. With a couple of quick shakes of his head, he cleared away a few of the cobwebs.

"You heard about Trinity Church?" he mumbled.

"Yes, Jesus. It was all over the news. But you couldn't see much because the camera crew was across the street." There was excitement in her voice.

"I was there."

"You could have been hurt, baby."

*You have an answer for everything*, he thought.

But this:

"They got John, Angie."

Rather coldly, he realized, his partner's death was good for a couple of minutes of peace and quiet.

"Oh, no," Angie said, very slowly, and that was all.

He forced himself to roll out of bed and into the bathroom where he splashed some cold water onto his face and rubbed his eyes.

He looked deeply into the mirror.

*Not pretty.*

A minute later he was naked under the shower, the hot water pummeling life back into his tired body, revving it up.

Out and dry, he slipped on a pair of clean pajamas and put on an old robe bearing some bastard tartan design, long faded. On his way to the bathroom, Angie stopped in front of him.

"I'm sorry about John, honey," she said sincerely. They'd gotten along all right, Angie and John, not that Freeman ever went out of his

way to push them together. “But it’s Christmas, so you won’t mention it to Mom and Pop, will you, hon? I don’t want to spoil Christmas Day, you know, what with opening the presents and all.”

Freeman just looked at her, opened his mouth to let forth with an oath, then snapped it shut and nodded.

*What’s the use?*

“Thank you, Amos.”

He was about to say, *Don’t mention it, dear*, but it was too early for sarcasm, and Angie didn’t have any appreciation for that fine art. He wondered how the day would go for McTaggart’s wife Patricia and the two kids, “what with opening the presents and all.”

He thought again about Patricia McTaggart. In the confusion of last night, he had not thought about who would tell the family. Surely Ferguson had sent someone over—and certainly it was a homicide detective—but it should have been him. Certainly Ferguson had sent someone. That was one of his duties. To see that next of kin were told at once about a death.

*Shit.*

He went down to the kitchen and electra-perked a pot of coffee. He still had one of those old fashioned percolators. Made the coffee hotter. Not as hot at the Cuban coffee Rafaella drank. Not as hot as Rafa.

Angie joined him a few minutes later and they had a cup together. His: regular. Hers: black with a packet of Equal. He was quiet. She rattled on to herself about what a fine person John had been.

“... *what with opening the presents and all*,” was all he could think.

Soon the house came alive and his parents came down to join them, followed in a few minutes by her parents. He gave both mothers and dads cheek-kisses. His mother opened the refrigerator and started pulling out the makings for what he knew would be a full and satisfying breakfast.

When the phone rang.

It was half past eight.

Freeman picked up the kitchen wall extension. It was in a hideous yellow, didn't match the mauve walls, he noted for the zillionth time.

"Freeman," he said clearly.

"Lieutenant Freeman?"

"No, it's Bozo the Booby-eater," he said stupidly.

"Lieutenant, this is Alex Conrad, Mayor Lindstadt's aide..."

"Oh," he said dumbly, straightening his shoulders.

"There's a meeting at Gracie Mansion today at two o'clock sharp to go over the Trinity Church matter. The mayor's passed the word down. He wants you there."

"Why me?"

Maybe he shouldn't have asked that. Might give them second thoughts.

Alex Conrad offered a half-laugh.

"I don't know, Freeman. I'm not *privy* to those conversations. Just be there." A slight pause. "You *do* know where Gracie Mansion is?" he said with a smirky edge, the twerp.

"I'll be there."

"Right, then..."

*Asshole!*

## Chapter 2

### *Christmas Day – 11:02 P.M.*

In Connecticut, about thirty-five miles west of Bridgeport, in the middle of an open, unused field, sat a spacious barn, its wood so old and weathered that the owner's chief occupation with it was turning down requests from framing companies that wanted to repurpose the wood for distressed frames. Then there was the time a guy wanted to buy the barn and panel his trendy restaurant in the East Village with it.

Inside this barn, the morning after the robbery, Manny Branch and his men were trying to make some heavy decisions.

From an academic standpoint, Manny Branch found this an interesting exercise. Up until this moment, he had made all the decisions—all of them—and no one else in the gang had ever so much as questioned him. And, just as he'd promised them when he assembled them into a team, everything had gone off perfectly.

Give or take a few murders.

Now the robbery was over, everybody wanted to get his two cents' in.

The barn served their purposes well. It should have been ripped down years ago. Inside, it was empty—plenty of room for the black Chevy van and a few cots. An old table had been found in one corner around which a group often sat and played poker before or after their regular meetings when prepping the crime. Several kerosene heaters warmed the place—a bit. It was drafty. It leaked. But it served. The nearest neighbor was four miles away. The owner lived in Bridgeport. Branch had rented it four months earlier. The gang had been there off and on for four weeks.

Jimmy Simon sat obligingly off in a corner while Ernie Domasky and Nick Ritter argued about what to do with him. Simon had told them about the news crew and the camera. At first Branch himself had

been furious, but after thinking about it, he thought, Simon had done all right by himself handling the situation off the cuff. He could only imagine the way Domasky would have fucked it up. Simon was the coolest, the smoothest, and that's why Branch had chosen him to play usher in the first place.

Domasky and Ritter seemed to reach a mutual agreement: Simon would have to stay out of sight, preferably in the barn. All Branch had told them was that they would probably return to their normal lives and families after the job and leave the conversion of the diamonds (and now the bonds) to Branch. Regular meetings were to be held every Saturday in the barn until everything was liquidated. That's all Branch had told them. But Branch was still thinking about Simon. He could tell from Domasky's veiled remarks that he'd as soon shoot Simon between the eyes and bury him under the barn's floor as discuss the matter any further. Branch figured Simon could see that much as well.

Finally, Branch decided to end the discussion until he made up his own mind about several things. He stepped forward.

"Simon stays in the barn. I'll be out here when you all go home, so he won't get lonely. We'll talk about it later."

The talk returned to the cash they had gotten away with—a nice sum—but Branch had already decided it would stay in the barn untouched for the present. His decision had prevailed against wide disension, but just barely. No one could see any reason why they shouldn't divide it then and there. The bills weren't marked in any way. They were clean, safe, ready to spend. Amagno had six kids. Scaglione was behind in his rent. Ritter was behind in his car payments. With Galati, it was his refrigerator payments. They could all use the cash right now. But Branch had won out.

"Why can't we split it?" Ritter was saying.

"It's fucking Christmas, Manny. Christmas!" Scaglione shouted.

“I think Nick’s right, Manny,” Domasky added in support. “I don’t have much for Christmas.”

The others joined in to support these two. Branch held up his hands.

“If we split it, we split it,” he said. “I’m still thinking over some choices open to us—not with the cash, but the other stuff.”

“I say we split—right now,” Scaglione said.

“If we split it, I’ll only let you take a little at a time. Each share comes to plenty. And all it would take to fuck the rest of us up is one of you throwing it around in some bar acting like a fucking big shot.”

A flood of protests about knowing better.

“Okay, okay. But let me think some more. I’m not sure how much is safe. But we’ll do it a little later. Then you can all get back home.”

Branch left the barn, telling the others he wanted to think. He knew the loot was safe. There were too many of them to oppose him (they couldn’t agree on anything), and so no one would take anything without at least one—and probably several who really looked up to him—telling him about it. Everything was safe in that crowd.

Alone outside, he zipped up his jacket and walked down the overgrown road toward the tree line about a hundred yards distant. The sun was high and bright, the air cold, crisp and not easy to breathe at first. It hadn’t rained or snowed in several weeks. And there was no trace of the last snow anywhere in the disused field around him.

The twigs and fallen branches cracked under his step as he walked into the thick forest—thick yet bare of any foliage—thinking about the others:

Jimmy Simon, who, in Branch’s own opinion, had done so well covering for them out front;

Louie Pate, who had guarded Parkhurst, the choir and others in the sanctuary;

Marcus Riley, who'd helped him with the searching, the funny man easy to get along with and who made no trouble for anybody, just did his job and somehow got a laugh out of life;

Nick Ritter, who also helped with the searching and who ferried the loot to the van;

Ben Scaglione, who guarded the organist and watched the whole congregation from the gallery, another good man;

Luis Amagno, who guarded the congregation as they filed down the aisle and back up after they were searched;

Ernie Domasky, who searched the pews, a loudmouth of an asshole;

And Al Galati, who drove the black van.

Eight men.

Eight partners.

*Too many?* he wondered. He remembered last night after they'd gotten back to the barn, successful, and were discussing what to do next, that Scaglione had wondered aloud why everything up *through* the robbery had been so perfectly planned by Branch, while nothing *after* the robbery had been decided. Branch had told them he hadn't really thought what he would do after the robbery.

But, of course, he had.

## Chapter 3

### *Christmas Day – 1:05 P.M.*

Charlie Kolsnar was still sleeping late in the afternoon following the robbery. He had been sleeping most of the day.

After he shot and killed the two guards at Gerard, Nugent, he rode the subways for what was left of the night. In the morning when the few stores that were going to open on Christmas Day did open, he went to one and bought a cheap but well-fitting bushy-haired wig in the same shade as his own neatly clipped hair. He also picked up some inexpensive casual clothing, a peacoat, a pair of worker's overalls, and a pair of work boots.

Then he took to the subways again, by now thoroughly sick of the cold and thankful that the awful smells of the subway were muted by the freezing weather, and rode through the seemingly endless, mind-numbing, soulless tunnels up to the West Nineties.

On the way, he waited until his car, at the back end of the train, emptied of the three people who were in it when he boarded. With them gone, he slipped off his Brooks Brothers topcoat, his expensive but conservative suit jacket, and stuffed them into the large brown paper bag holding his purchases. His gun, shoulder holster and all, followed these articles into the bag. Looking at his reflection in the dirty glass opposite, he settled the wig snugly into place.

With a lurching rumble, the train pulled into the next station and four people entered his car, so he didn't have time to change into his work boots. He put the peacoat on and buttoned it up, looking over the four newcomers carefully as he rolled the brown paper bag tight.

At his stop, he left the car looking like another man. Outside, he walked west to an old rundown hotel he knew. He checked in and paid

a week in advance in small bills he'd counted out ahead of time and put into the pocket of the peacoat. As he walked up to his third floor room, he was certain the sleepy clerk reading the *Post* had not noticed the quality of his shoes, nor the fact that his slacks properly belonged to a two thousand dollar suit.

Inside his room, he double-locked the door and took a long shower. The bathroom was small and grimy, but he resigned himself to the life he would have to lead over the next few weeks—or months—depending. As he dried himself with a threadbare towel obviously washed without bleach and listened to the radiator's modern symphony pushing a humidless heat into the room, he thought about his wife and adolescent daughter.

In a way—it was only natural, he supposed. While riding the rails in the subway last night, he'd had the urge to go by his apartment to see them one more time, but before his dream crumbled into dust at the church, he hadn't planned on seeing them ever again, hadn't planned to go by on his way to the airport last night, didn't want to, really, and concluded that the urge came on him only because his plans had taken such a disastrous turn, and not because he really loved either his wife or his daughter. Like any man, he'd had the primitive urge to seek the familiar when confronted with a setback. But—he had to be honest with himself—he knew it was precisely the “familiar” that he had sought by stealing the bonds to escape from.

No, he would never see them again. His wife's parents were wealthy and would see his family well taken care of—not that it mattered a whole lot to him, he admitted.

He had over \$30,000 in his brown paper bag—a nice bit of cash.

It had passed through his mind after he'd secured the money to go straight to LaGuardia, to take a domestic flight (surely they would have checked the international flights if they had gotten so far as that bulletin he heard) to Miami, and then grab a private plane to the Bahamas or somewhere out of the country. On consideration, he thought that

route was always open to him if he failed to get the bonds back. In Miami it was easy to get out of the country without having to show your passport.

He had no pajamas, it occurred to him after he dried himself, and he was use to wearing pajamas, but he was tired and fell naked into bed, exhausted, hating the dry heat he had to inhale.

Because he knew the bond black market so thoroughly, he had every confidence he had an odds-on chance of seeing his bonds back. If not all of them, at least a good portion of them.

Furthermore, he was supremely confident that he possessed the skill set necessary to navigate his way through the twists and turns he'd have to manage while pursuing the guys responsible for his loss.

He had plenty of money to see him through to the end, one way or another, and so far as he could see into the future, plenty of time as well.

So he slept.

More soundly than he thought he would.

## Chapter 4

### *Christmas Day – 1:10 P.M.*

Amos Freeman left his house and got into his green Ford about noon. He was a little weary, what with “opening the presents and all.” Angie and the folks were a little upset that he had to go, but they were excited by the (to them) mysterious summons to Gracie Mansion.

“Maybe they’re going to promote you,” Angie’s mother surmised.

Freeman could just imagine what a sketch it would be seeing the mayor conduct Freeman’s annual evaluation.

He had to drive into town to see Patricia McTaggart. She and the boys lived in a small but nice apartment house near the eastern side of New York University. Patricia was thirty-four and a Ph.D in archeology.

There was a place to park half a block from the apartment house, but Freeman parked illegally by a fire hydrant in front of the building on purpose. It was cold out. Why walk? And maybe it would help cut the visit short. But, he found himself thinking, if he wanted the meeting to be short, why had he given himself more than two hours before he had to be at Gracie Mansion?

He knew why.

He climbed the stairs to the second floor and walked down a short corridor and looked at the apartment door:

Apt. 2-C/McTaggart.

He sighed heavily.

And knocked.

She was a beautiful woman, Patricia, there was no doubt about it. That’s the first thing he thought when she opened the door. He didn’t think about John being dead or anything else—just how beautiful and

slender Patricia was—all five-foot-six of her. Her hair was light gold, her eyes a cool blue. She had a fine clear complexion and lips with a slight pouty pucker to them that could say all a sexy gal like her had to say—when she wanted to say it, that is. The eyes were dry, but a little red—she'd been crying not long ago—and the pucker in her lips was more pronounced than he remembered it ever being—it made her look sexier, he found himself thinking, though he cursed himself for thinking such thoughts when he knew his mind ought to be dwelling on her dead husband and his dead ex-partner.

But she *was* gorgeous.

She wore a loose beige mohair sweater with nothing under it and a pair of light brown corduroy slacks. She was barefoot.

He walked in and he took her roughly in his arms, kicking the door closed behind them with one foot as he kissed her passionately, not like a friend, but like the secret lovers they'd been for over a year. She responded with the same intensity. Then they broke into a tight, violent hug, his strong arms claspng tight around her, her head buried between his broad shoulders as the tears squeezed their way through her eyelids. He cried as well.

Finally, they came apart.

“Where are the boys?” he asked.

“With my mom—it’s okay.”

He brushed the hair away from her face, where it had become tangled, and tucked it behind her ears. She had her arms around his neck.

“I feel like shit,” he said.

“That makes two of us.”

“I’m sorry it wasn’t me who came last night.”

“That’s all right, Amos.”

He unbuttoned his overcoat and tossed it on the couch.

“Who’d the captain send over?” he asked.

“What?” she blinked.

She hadn’t been listening.

“Last night—who’d the captain send over?”

“I don’t remember,” she said with a distracted, nervous smile. And then softly: “Somebody ... I sent him away after he told me.”

“Patricia...” he began.

“Coffee?” she asked, trying to brighten, and moving deliberately toward the kitchen.

He followed her in. She got a cup and saucer for him out of the cabinet.

“How many pots have you had?”

“Three,” she laughed, handing him the coffee. She knew he took it black. “You’ve been though this before, right?”

“Let’s not talk about that,” he looked into his coffee, could feel through the cup how hot it was, but took a sip anyway, scalding his tongue. “*Shit!*” he muttered. He looked back to her. She was smiling like a parent and shaking her head skeptically from left to right.

She walked past him into the living room and he followed her. The apartment was small, but Patricia had what they call a “way” with small apartments. The sort of “way” that made you wonder what she would have done with a big estate with large rooms, high ceilings, fancy moldings and spacious halls, a Martha Stewart spread in Westchester. There were lots of prints—the homey cozy kind of fabrics on the furniture and the “arty” kind on the walls—tasteful knick-knacks—no crap at all—nice-looking dried flower arrangements on the rough, heavy planked coffee table, in a couple of corners and on a pedestal in the little hallway by the front door.

Patricia plopped unceremoniously down on the full squishy cushion on a large sofa in the living room (upholstered in an exotic print of East Indian derivation, it looked like to Freeman) and propped her bare feet on the coffee table, stretching her hands behind her neck to look at the ceiling.

She sighed audibly as Freeman sat down next to her.

Freeman looked at the trimmed Christmas tree in the far corner, the pin lights on a strand twinkling cheerfully, and thought of the little twins, Pat and Speedy. He put a hand on her thigh.

“What do we do now?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” she mumbled. “Do you know how many times I’ve wondered what to do about John?”

“A hundred, a thousand, just like me.”

“And now this.”

“Yeah.”

“When it first started with you and me, I wondered how it would ever end,” she said. “I used to go through my mind trying to come up with the words—the *exact* words—to tell John that I loved you, that I’ve been in love with you for over a year, that we’d been sleeping together whenever we could, that it wasn’t just a fling, that I’d thought about it and thought about it until I couldn’t think about it anymore. And, you know, I never could figure out what I was going to say to him, how I was going to put it, how I was going to *tell* him I wanted to leave him for you.”

Amos hung his head.

“I know.”

“But I knew I had to talk to him someday, that I had to get it out of me so you and I could start a *real* life together, sharing the kids the way it was meant to be, and to give *him* a chance to start fresh.”

“Patricia, I feel so awful, so bad, so shitty. It wasn’t meant to be like this.”

He started to tear up, water gathering in his eyes. She leaned forward and wiped the tears away with her gentle fingers, then with her lips, until she was kissing him again.

“Hey,” she said, trying to cheer him up. “We’ve got to get a hold of ourselves.”

“Where do we go from here?”

“We go on, Amos, that’s what we do, just like we did before. The problem is we both feel like shit.”

“That’s understating it, Patricia.”

“Look, it happened. At least now he’ll never have to know—”

“That we were fucking around on him behind his back.”

Her mood tensed.

“Amos, it’s bad *enough*, all right? This only makes it worse.”

“I know, I’ve got to get a grip—it’s just so, so...”

She took him in her arms and he fell against her chest.

“I know, I know. We’ll just pick up slowly, take it one day at a time. You’ll spend more time with the kids—the way you’ve wanted to all along—and it won’t be awkward the way we always thought it would be. It’ll all work out for the best. Things always do.”

“The hard part, you know, is that we both loved John.”

“I know. He was great. But I couldn’t help falling in love with you, Amos, and we’re alive and he’s not. And we have to live with that and make the best of it.”

“Yeah,” he said weakly.

“Things always work out for the best, even if it seems bad at the time. We have to have faith in that, don’t we?”

“It’s all we’ve got, Patricia.”

“That—and each other.”

## Chapter 5

### *Christmas Day – 1:15 P.M.*

Manny Branch came out of the woods and looked across the winter field to the neglected barn that stood a hundred yards away. The loveless December wind tore through the leafless trees and whistled around his head, biting his cheeks and stinging his ears.

And yet he felt hot. Hot inside. Tense. Under pressure. About to be tested. His eyes saw the crumbling hulk of the barn as a mud hut on a hill rising out of a soupy marsh in Iraq—an objective to be taken, conquered: the inhabitants defending it slaughtered. The open field was suddenly a shallow marshy saucer of water and mud. In Iraq they'd have called in air support to bomb the fucking enemy into spaghetti sauce before they moved in.

But there was no air support. He had to do it alone. And his expertise as a demolitions expert would be of no help here. He could not get close enough to set a charge—not into a little hill surrounded on all sides by a broad open marshy field.

He heard another voice—and now another one—in his head, directing him. Conflicting. Confusing. Indecisive. Decisive. Definite.

He knew what he had to do.

He walked down the unused road toward the hill, wondering if he should crouch, knowing at the same time how foolish the very thought was. They wouldn't know. He was one of them. They had done that a lot in Iraq. Dressed up like the enemy. The enemy did it with good results. So they did it, too. Yes, he was one of them, and there was nothing to worry about. God, for some dynamite, some plastics—anything. It was always better that way. You didn't have to look into their eyes.

Manny Branch walked into the barn and several of the others turned around to look his way and then resumed what they were doing: talking, playing poker (the game was five-card draw), huddling by the kerosene heaters.

Unnoticed, he walked casually over to a weak thin post—dusty with the work of termites—and picked up two of the MAC-10 machine pistols they'd used at Trinity Church.

Every eye turned his way when they heard him free the safety catches.

Clean.

Distinct.

Definite.

Intentional.

Deadly.

Branch scoured their eyes for just a couple of seconds. He saw shock, caution, fury, disbelief, and even a smile (from Scaglione, who thought he was kidding).

Just as Nick Ritter said, "Manny—," he pressed the triggers and swept the room, filling the old barn with a staccato sound and the wrenching screams of men whose flesh was being ripped apart by countless flying bullets.

In a few seconds, no one was standing and the horrid sounds of dying men were only remembered echoes.

Branch went over to them for a quick look.

There was Louie Pate with his mouth wide open, a half-finished scream in his throat when he died; Nick Ritter, whose eyes were closed; Ben Scaglione, no longer with a smile on his face, who'd wanted to split the cash right away because his rent was past due; Luis Amagno, who had six kids to feed; Ernie Domasky, the loud son of a bitch he was glad to get rid of; Al Galati, who was behind in his refrigerator payments; and Jimmy Si—

*Where the fuck was Jimmy Simon?*

He snapped his machine pistols back up as he swung around the barn in time to see Simon lunge from behind a battered stall for another weapon. He was still dressed in his dark suit, and Branch remembered later with distaste how he'd smiled slightly, when he saw Simon's eyes at this moment—knowing, as an antelope knows when the lion is upon him—that that he'd been caught.

*Just in time.*

Branch riddled the air with bullets, almost cutting Simon in half with a horrendous barrage of lead as he held the weapons level and pumped Simon's midriff full of messy death. Simon collapsed like a folded piece of sopping scarlet paper, dropping the weapon he'd just managed to grasp when Branch got him.

That finished them all.

Branch looked over the bodies again, thinking of past due rent, fridge and car payments—the past due accounts of ex-cons—pitying the bodies of the men with more sympathy than he'd ever felt for them when they were alive, thinking of their wives, their families—Amagno's six kids. Now it was Amagno's wife, and not Amagno, who had six mouths to feed. Hell, they were already on welfare, thought Branch. And now? Now what would they do without Amagno?

Most were ex-cons like him, he thought, worthless to everybody but themselves and those dependent on them.

“What a fucking mess,” he said aloud as he took one last look at the scene before turning and walking out of the barn for a glance around the open field.

But, bad as it was, it was nothing like Iraq.

No, it was peaches and cream compared to Iraq.

Was he nuts? he wondered. That's what the shrink in prison had thought—but never said in so many words. Dr. White was much too polite ever to say he was nuts, Branch knew. College must make you more polite, he thought.

He wondered how long it would be before the bodies rotted or were discovered. Probably weeks, he figured. He'd seen hundreds of dead bodies in Iraq—some an hour old, some months. Dead was dead. A week or a month. What was the difference? The owner of the barn never came out here—or hadn't for as long as Branch had been paying the rent to "store some old boxes." It could be weeks before discovery. It made sense.

Now everything was his—the cash, the millions in diamonds and bonds—everything.

And all the others were dead now.

All of them.

Dead.

All, really, but one, he thought.

And his turn would come.

## Chapter 6

### *Christmas Day – 2:10 P.M.*

Amos Freeman had never been in Gracie Mansion before. As he looked around the foyer after being admitted by the butler, he certainly thought everything looked “nice,” but as he was conducted through several spacious rooms full of beautiful furniture, he figured it couldn’t be much good living in a place where you didn’t own the tables and chairs yourself. This wasn’t his life, any more than his life was the mayor’s.

The butler suddenly stopped in front of tall white double doors, and Freeman had to think quickly to stop before he ran into the tottering old guy. The butler opened the door and gestured grandly into the room, standing aside for Freeman to pass.

Heads turned to look at him. Heads belonging to faces atop expensive suits, some with hands thrust casually into trouser pockets, some carrying Bloody Marys provided by a roving serving-man carrying a buffed silver tray. The room was large, with most of the furnishings elegantly placed against the walls; obviously the antechamber to the mayor’s office-away-from-the-office.

Present were several men he didn’t know, along with some he did: Captain Alan Ferguson, who gave Freeman a jealous glance, Chief Inspector Joseph Fowler and Deputy Major Marlton.

A well-dressed, smiling man in his early thirties approached him.

“You must be Lieutenant Freeman,” he said definitely in a semi-hushed voice.

“That’s right.”

“Alex Conrad. Howareyawannadrink?”

*Yes, I do.*

“No thanks,” he said.

As Conrad spoke, Freeman caught sight of other department big-wigs he knew by sight, but only by sight.

“The commissioner’s alone with His Honor. After they’re finished, you’ll all meet,” Conrad whispered in such a casual way Freeman had the idea that that was the way he talked all the time. “Then we’ll get to see the tape.”

Freeman had been thinking about the tape with the “usher” in it, and a lot of other things as well, on his way to Gracie Mansion. Early that morning he’d called Juan Penudo, the station manager he’d talked to from Trinity, to ask about the tape. He’d said people from the department had been down and picked it up. And Penudo still wanted the cup of coffee Freeman promised him.

After that, Freeman had checked in with his precinct, but Ferguson had not been there. He found out, though, that the investigation of the Trinity matter was awaiting decisions to be handed down from the commissioner himself after the meeting today with the mayor.

What all this meant to Freeman was that the huge bugaboo of NYPD and city politics was about to descend, probably in its usual shroudlike manner, over the whole investigation.

“Jesus, just give me a routine murder,” he said under his breath.

“I beg your pardon,” Conrad turned to him.

“Nothing. Talking to myself.” He smiled.

Such investigations almost always became totally unmanageable. Even if a good man headed it, he was so busy handling City Hall egos and attending news conferences and shuffling reports and memos that he didn’t have enough hours in the day to *think* about the crime. And Freeman knew from his own experience that if you didn’t have the simple time to *think*, you’d never solve the crime, get into the minds of the people who committed it, think about what kind of men they were, based on what they had done, so you could figure out what they were likely to do next. That took thinking. And thinking took time.

No time.

No thinking.

Equals no solution.

Equals bullshit.

There was Chief Fowler—known as Fatty Fowler in the department—across the room talking uneasily to Deputy Mayor Marlton. Occasionally, he would rub his big tummy in a small circle to the left of his belly-button as Marlton made a point. A nervous tick. His little pig eyes were as tiny as ever, hidden behind the shiny steel-rimmed frames of his glasses.

Fowler was sure to be the “working” head of the investigation. He would be the operations man who would direct the activities of the hundreds of staff that would be brought onto the case. He was ideal. He’d been at the scene. And he was known to have no political ambitions (about the best thing to be said about him from City Hall’s point of view). An ambitious man could take this investigation and really go to town. Fowler was certain not to. But while Fowler could run the men under him day and night and do it well, he was likely to be too deferential to those above him. He was (but not as much) like Ferguson in that way. And Ferguson didn’t have Fowler’s successful and effective hard-balled way with the people beneath him.

The question now was: Who would be placed in general command of the investigation? In other words, who in City Hall would the investigation be a stepping stone for? The mayor alone would decide that. But Freeman could expect some hot shot shithead to be stuck over everybody in the department.

Maybe it was Marlton over there talking to (rather than *with*) Fatty Fowler. (He’d noticed how politicians did that: hogged the conversation). Marlton was a likely candidate. Lindstadt was in his second term, his wife was sick and word was already out that he wouldn’t be running for reelection. And word was that he liked Marlton. The maneuvering had already begun.

Personally, Freeman didn't like the son of a bitch. He had, however, to give him credit for being a good politician. (*Good in the sense of being a pro*, Freeman corrected himself). Marlton's enemies kept a low profile. Freeman naturally assumed every New York politician had a pile of enemies, but Marlton was cleverer than most. He'd curried favor with all the minorities; the unions loved him; management (the kind of guys who back you if they thought the percentages were okay) accepted him, which was good enough; he had good connections in Washington, which would be good for aid from the Feds; and he was "well regarded" (half-way feared) upstate, meaning maybe Albany wouldn't have such a stranglehold over the city when (Freeman caught the fact that he didn't think *if*) Marlton became mayor. But Freeman didn't give a shit about all that garbage. All he wanted to know was who would be the civie over Fowler.

Which brought him back to the investigation—and his part in it. None of his mental wanderings had told him what he was doing in the anteroom to the mayor's office in Gracie Mansion. It was obvious from the curious glances the others would now and then throw in his direction that they were curious, too. Even Marlton looked at him—three times—and Freeman noticed him leaning over to whisper something to Fowler, who then looked quickly at Freeman before whispering what was surely Freeman's name back into Marlton's ear. Freeman noticed—watching all this from the corner of his eye—that Fowler had not dawdled over an explanation as to *why* Freeman was there, meaning that, if Fowler didn't know why, no one else did either. And Marlton, figuring Freeman was a nobody (*pretty much right on target*, Freeman thought), seemed to change the subject. Freeman realized it was pointless wondering about it, and decided to do as Marlton was doing: wait and find out. Not that there was a choice.

Conrad had been saying something for the past minute or so, but he hadn't been listening.

"Huh?" he asked.

"I was saying, Lieutenant," Conrad said a little peevisly, "that you're not much of a mingler, are you?"

"No, I just stand around." He smiled. Two more brownie points.

"Any idea why you're here, Lieutenant?"

He could tell, from the way Conrad asked, that he was dying to know.

"I'm not privy to those conversations," Freeman smiled, trying to say with his smile that he really knew why, but just wasn't telling because he was such a cool dude.

But Conrad laughed it off. Freeman was sure, somehow, that Conrad laughed a lot of things off.

"I use that phrase a lot around here, Lieutenant Freeman."

"I guess your job keeps you guessing about all kinds of things."

"Yes, my job keeps me guessing, that's true."

Watching Ferguson for a few minutes, Freeman understood from his captain's expression—forcibly relaxed one minute, strained the next—that he was debating the pros and cons of coming over to talk to him.

Finally, the captain decided to make the plunge, thought Freeman, admit in front of all the other hobnobbers that he existed, and strolled over with an indifference marked by not a little obvious condescension.

"Hello, Freeman—"

But he got no further, because at this point the door to His Honor's office opened and Gus Haffey appeared.

Ferguson shut his trap and turned toward the commissioner.

"Would you all please come in?"

## Chapter 7

*Christmas Day – 2:25 P.M.*

The mayor had a spacious office—befitting his station and the size of the other rooms in the house, thought Freeman. Chairs had been brought in for the meeting and these were arranged in small rows to one side of the mayor’s desk. They faced a large flat-screen TV at one end of the room.

Lindstadt was sitting at his desk watching people enter when Freeman walked through the door behind Ferguson and Conrad. He stood and motioned to everyone to find a chair.

“Alex,” he beckoned to Conrad, who came over to receive a whisper. Conrad nodded, left the room in a hurry and returned carrying some papers which he laid before the mayor, who had remained standing, his arm still in a sling from last night. White bandages and bruises were prominent on his face.

“We are meeting here today for the purpose of immediately organizing an efficient, and what I am determined will be a speedy, investigation of the Trinity Church affair. I apologize for taking you away from your families on Christmas Day, but I consider the solution of this crime and the apprehension of the people responsible for it to be of the highest priority.”

*So would I if I looked the way you do,* thought Freeman.

“I met with Deputy Mayor Marlton earlier, and just concluded a discussion on this subject with Commissioner Haffey. I have decided how we will proceed with the investigation. But before we get on with that, I’d like the commissioner to go over the damage report from last night.”

He nodded and Haffey stood up holding a single sheet of paper.

“Last night’s crime was a stunning blow. It was a massive crime expertly carried out. According to events as we reconstructed them, six men were gunned down in the center aisle of the church, eight in the congregation were killed by stray bullets, twenty-nine wounded, ten seriously. Killed later was Detective third grade John McTaggart. Everyone in the church was robbed of their personal possessions, and the take is—to put it simply—staggering. Although almost five hundred women were wearing jewelry, some of it was costume or imitations provided by insurance companies. But, as best we can figure, and until complete reports are filed, some three hundred and eighty-two women were wearing diamonds—mostly rings and bracelets—with an average value of forty-three thousand dollars, bringing the take in diamonds alone to over sixteen million dollars. Hell, they even robbed the members of the choir and priests in the sanctuary.”

Gasps and even a couple of low whistles came from a bunch of cops not easily impressed, thought Freeman.

“And then there is the additional matter of the bonds stolen from Gerard, Nugent and Company by this Charles Kolsnar—another two hundred million.”

*Worth what on the street?* Freeman wondered. *Fifty, sixty percent?*

“The cash—untraceable, of course—stolen from the people in the congregation came to a little better than one hundred seventy-five thousand.”

There was an appropriately numb silence as Haffey wound it up. The figures, when they were put together, were indeed, well, amazing. But when you thought about the kinds of rocks the women who went to Trinity Church would wear, it wasn’t surprising at all. \$40,000 or \$50,000 for a diamond was not an outrageous sum for one of those girls to have, and in fact, it sounded a little low to Freeman to be an accurate average.

“Let’s move on to the tape, Gus,” prompted Lindstadt from his seat.

“As you all know by now,” Haffey said, motioning to an aide standing in a corner who moved to a stand with computer on it behind the little audience, “WNBC was outside Trinity Church while the crime was being committed, and they interviewed the man they thought was an usher for the church. This same man turns out to be one of the gang placed out front to keep anyone from entering the church while the crime was carried out. Here’s the footage.”

Haffey nodded to his aide. The lights went out and the footage started. Freeman was biting his lower lip with anxiety.

*There it was.*

The scene out in front of Trinity Church last night—recaptured for them. There was Brian Anderson talking into his mike, the facade of the church looming up behind him. Every eye was on the barely discernible figure in the background, under the portals of the entrance. You could just make out his white carnation. Anderson was talking earnestly into the microphone. Freeman looked at the unfolding event with the same anxious excitement he might have felt watching a great suspense movie—only he knew the ending.

“... dramatic confrontation is the fact that Janie’s father is the Reverend Emory Parkhurst, rector of historic Trinity Church.”

Then there was a splice and the usher’s nervous face was in close-up on the screen.

*“What do you want?”*

He *was* nervous, thought Freeman, but Jesus Christ, he had every right to be. *What an unexpected thing this must have been for the s.o.b.*

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

“What’s that got to do with me?” the usher asked.

“You’re an usher, aren’t you?”

“Uh, of course I am.”

Freeman—and everybody else in the room—caught the “uh.”

“But I’m not official, nothing I say’s official, you see? You’ll have to talk to ...”

And it went on.

The usher said his name was John, uh, Fletcher. Anderson made him stumble his way through a denunciation of the protesting dykes, though it was obvious to Freeman the usher couldn't have cared less.

Then the man with his wife and kid came up and wanted to get inside. This sent the usher into a panic.

"... we're full up."

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

Then Mike Harris was in the picture, trying to settle the argument, and suggesting the usher bend the fire regulation.

*The fire marshal will love this!*

Then the usher placed himself on the side of the law, and said he'd report Harris if he tried to make him let the man with the wife and kid in.

*What a farce*, thought Freeman. But it worked.

After the "movie," the lights came up and Haffey addressed them again.

"We have people going through the files using facial recognition software to look for this man now. In the meantime, we've got an APB out on him with a description and we're having a good photo taken from this tape which will be sent out, too."

Haffey sat down and Lindstadt, bundled up and in pain, bobbed up again.

"The initial reports contain much more information..."

*Mostly misleading bullshit*, thought Freeman, though he hadn't read any of them yet.

"... and these will be passed on to you after this meeting. Now," he paused, "for the make-up of the team, I've selected Deputy Mayor Marlton to direct the investigation."

Freeman noticed several heads turning to look at Marlton, but the deputy mayor continued to look directly at His Honor, feigning absorbed interest.

“Chief Inspector Fowler will assemble and direct the teams on the operational side of the investigation.”

*Meaning he would be Marlton's shit man.*

“Mr. Marlton will report directly to me on the progress of this investigation,” and again Lindstadt paused, “but in addition, I’ve decided that Lieutenant Amos Freeman will be detached from his routine duties at the Twenty-eighth Precinct to act as direct liaison between Mr. Marlton’s office and me.”

There was a little buzzing. Heads turned *his* way now. Even Marlton turned around from his position on the front row to look at Freeman in the last row. He smiled. A thin smile and a nod. Freeman nodded back. But no smile for the slimy weasel.

It was pretty obvious from the light whispering going on (not to mention the look on Ferguson’s face) that this last bit had been a complete surprise to all. Freeman could sense the immediate threat several of the men in the room felt at the mere suggestion that there would be someone *else* between them and His Honor. Marlton and Fowler they expected, but now there was lowly Lieutenant Freeman. He knew they would think of him as an unknown quantity, and therefore, someone to be feared, assessed, judged, worked around. They would start asking their friends to find out all they could about him. What were his ambitions, both within the department and otherwise? What was he like? How did he operate? Would he cooperate with higher ups now that he had the mayor’s ear?

Etc.

*Bullshit*, thought Freeman. They would waste their time on that kind of bullshit and the investigation would become even more bogged down than it was going to get anyway.

Freeman was so busy thinking about the consequences of the mayor’s decision that he forgot to be as surprised as the others by the announcement.

Marlton was to report directly to the mayor—they always said things like that—but Freeman was to be liaison between the two of them. Lindstadt he liked all right, Marlton he didn't, from the very minute he smiled at him.

The mayor continued talking about the organization of the investigation, but Freeman was only half-listening, and was startled when Alex Conrad leaned over his shoulder.

“Freeman?”

“Yeah?”

“Stay behind after the meeting. The mayor wants to see you privately.”

“Sure thing.”

Conrad disappeared.

## Chapter 8

*Christmas Day – 3:20 P.M.*

Later, when the meeting broke up, Conrad materialized at Freeman's elbow at the proper moment, making Freeman think that this was the finest and most indicative characteristic of an efficient aide, and led him discreetly into another room off the mayor's office. He was left alone here for about twenty minutes and then Conrad reappeared and took him back to the mayor's office, announcing him in a soft voice and closing the door as he left. He and the mayor were alone together.

Lindstadt was at his desk looking over some papers, but stopped when Conrad closed the door.

"Here, Freeman, next to me," he gestured to a chair close beside the desk to his left.

Freeman sat and waited.

"It's this simple, Freeman. I want you working for me on this job. After you made such an impression on me last night, I had them send up your file this morning, and I noticed some of your fellow cops have a nickname for you: Dirty Amos. I figured that's the kind of cop I want as my eyes and ears on this investigation."

The brusque tone of Lindstadt's voice told Freeman that was all he wanted to say about it and would like Freeman to take it on that basis.

"Thank you, Mr. Mayor, I appreciate your confidence, but could I ask you a couple of questions?"

Lindstadt was human; he smiled.

"Certainly."

"Can't you get what you need from Marlton?"

“Yes and no. Yes, because he will make routine reports, written and in person. No, because if things are going badly, he won’t give me accurate reports.”

“Why appoint him?”

Lindstadt sighed.

“I’ll tell you, Lieutenant,” he said, leveling a puffy finger at Freeman’s face and screwing up his features into a wily expression, “because I *trust* you. Misuse that trust and I’ll have your head and any other part of you I can get my teeth into, understand?”

“Completely.”

“The reason I appointed him was, again, simple: I had to. He has too many friends, both here in the city and upstate—”

Meaning Capitol House at Albany, thought Freeman.

“—and he began angling for it last night at the church. I knew from the way he talked that he’d been on the phone to his cronies and told them that I would be strangling him if I didn’t give him this one. I’ve done my best to restrain Marlton, but he’s a sly character.”

“Why don’t you trust him?”

“Quite frankly, for personal and political reasons that are none of your God damn business.”

“Enough said, then. What exactly am I supposed to do?”

“You will work in the main office of the investigation—Marlton’s if you wish, Fowler’s if you wish—and merely keep me informed on what progress is made and any other details you think interesting.”

“I pick Fowler’s office. What control has Fowler or Marlton got over me?”

“None. That’ll be made clear in the papers that’ll come down from the commissioner’s office. But you will meet with me every Friday to go over the week’s progress.”

“If there is any.”

“There *will be* progress, Freeman, I assure you. Because if, after a couple of weeks, you tell me there is none, I can do what I like with

Marlton, and he knows it. He also knows to what use I'll be putting you, I would think, so do your best to stay clear of him."

"You're frank with me, Mr. Mayor. Can I be frank with you?"

Lindstadt nodded.

Freeman leaned over and leveled a finger back at the mayor.

"I don't want to be the asshole you use to stab Marlton in the back, okay? You want to stab him, stab him, but don't put the knife in my hands."

"I think we're on a casual basis already, Freeman, or can I call you Amos?" smiled Lindstadt. "By that you mean to ask if I'll be fair with Marlton. Yes. I will be. If you don't trust my motives for detaching you from routine service, you can decline the duty and go back to the Twenty-eighth."

"One more question."

"Yes."

"What do I *do* every day?"

Lindstadt spread his hands.

"Whatever your heart desires, Mr. Copper."

Freeman nodded.

"I see."

"You know, Freeman, there *is* a crime to solve," added the mayor with a wink.

"Well, maybe I'll just go out and solve it, Mr. Mayor."

"You go right ahead and do that, Dirty Amos. You go right ahead and do that."

## Chapter 9

### *Christmas Day – 5:45 P.M.*

“Hello, Big Dot,” Freeman said as he ambled into Big Dot’s Jungle Bar after leaving Gracie Mansion.

“Hello, Freeman.”

Big Dot’s was as dark at mid-day as it was at night. A little brightness filtered through the dirty windows looking out onto Blyton Street, and through the cheap stained glass in the front door, but the little bit of added light merely revealed the place for the pigsty it was.

Freeman nodded at two regulars as he sauntered all the way down the narrow aisle between the barstools on one side and the cramped dirty shadowy high-backed booths on the other and slid onto his stool, just around the slight curve the bar made as it rounded off. Big Dot followed him down on her side of the bar.

“Want the rest of that big black boy you was workin’ on last night?” Big Dot said, but with a quiet, deadpan voice.

“Maybe just one little sip, my girl,” Freeman slapped the bar with a gusto that rang hollow.

Big Dot had the bottle of Jack Daniels and a glass in front of her before the sound of the slap could fade away. They were both somber, a little embarrassed. Death had a way of doing that to friends.

Freeman looked at her.

“You heard about McTaggart or else you’re pregnant.”

Big Dot nodded, smiling ruefully as she poured Freeman’s first shot.

“I liked him, Freeman. I liked the guy.”

“Shit, so did I, Big Dot. So did I,” he mumbled in reply, picking up his glass and thinking at that moment about Patricia and how fine and warm she’d felt that morning.

“I heard about him on MSNBC when I got home last night.”

*“I was there, Big Dot.”*

Big Dot’s eyes popped.

*“You were? At the church, you mean?”*

Freeman nodded.

He explained to Big Dot what had happened at Trinity Church from his perspective, about the meeting at the mayor’s mansion, about his new position, his arrangement with His Honor, etc.

“I’m a free agent on this one, seems like.”

“This thing is huge, Freeman. Can a free agent crack it?”

“This one will,” Freeman nodded, his eyes narrowing with determination. “This one will ... if he gets a break.”

“Good luck.”

“I’ll be in the best position. I’ll have access to all the reports, and there’ll be a mountain of them, let me tell you, ma’am. It didn’t take me long to figure out I’m the luckiest guy working this job. Nobody to order me around or any of that shit. Better to be working on the whole thing than just a little tiny piece of it. I can digest more this way.”

“I see what you mean,” Big Dot said as a small glass appeared magically in her hand. She dipped over Freeman’s bottle and knocked back a stiff one.

“Who’s paying?”

“It’s on me. Let’s drink this one for John McTaggart.”

“For McTaggart? Why not?”

Suddenly Freeman’s insides felt like shit.

Big Dot filled their glasses and they swirled away the booze.

“He was a good kid,” Big Dot said with a lowered head, several fat chins bunching up around her neck.

“Yeah, but talking about it won’t make it any easier.”

“I know.”

“It never does.”

Big Dot frowned. “We don’t have to forget about him, though.”

“No,” Freeman said softly, very softly. “We never have to forget about him. And we won’t.”

He thought about Patricia, and looked up to Big Dot.

“Hell, Big Dot. Why not buy the house drinks?”

They looked toward the Blyton Street door. Nobody but the two regulars at the other end of the bar. Big Dot broke into a big smile.

“Why not? Fuck, it’s Christmas, ain’t it?”

# Chapter 10

## *New Year's Eve – 9:45 P.M.*

New Year's Eve was already predestined to be the Black Hole of all Social Occasions:

Item—his parents were visiting.

Item—his in-laws were visiting.

Big Item—they were going to his snotty sister Helen's lavish apartment on Park Avenue. The sister that Amos Freeman didn't get along with even on his good days.

So when Freeman got home and Angie told him she'd invited Patricia McTaggart to go with them (and she'd accepted), Freeman thought he'd just sit down and cry.

"She was actually relieved—just anything to get out of the house, y'know?"

"Yeah, do her good," he'd said with no enthusiasm whatsoever.

It was like some Guilt Patrol kept running up and down his street and whenever they couldn't find enough Catholics anywhere to dump their daily quota of Guilt upon, they stopped at his door and left it all there like a great big pile of smelly, steaming freshly pooped dog shit.

A whole week had passed since Freeman had been appointed special liaison to the mayor. Hundreds of detectives had been reassigned to Operation Trinity, a headquarters had been set up, offices rearranged, command structures organized.

He'd been by three times in that week to see Patricia and the twins. Patricia had been going nuts in the apartment, fielding all the sympathy calls and drop-by visits, the media maelstrom that hit her, not having the luxury to escape it all by going to work since she was off during the holidays.

The funeral wasn't for a few more days—there had been so much more to deal with since it became a Media Event. Now, all the top political and police brass had to be accommodated. Commissioner Haffey had assigned four aides just to assist Patricia with funeral arrangements and dealing with protocol matters and logistics.

So it made sense that it would do her good to get out, and that night when the stretch limo Helen had sent for them pulled into Patricia's street, Angie whipped out her cell phone and told her they were downstairs. In a minute, Patricia was crawling into the car, finding a seat between Freeman and his mother-in-law. In the darkness, she held his hand for a minute as she fielded their questions about the funeral arrangements, how the kids were, and accepted the millionth offer of sympathy she'd received since John was killed.

*January 1 – 11:18 A.M.*

Traffic wasn't too bad as the limo made its way from Washington Square to Park Avenue and 64th Street, even though it was New Year's Eve.

As soon as everybody expressed condolences, there was a pause in which nobody said anything.

“Well,” said Angie, her mood changing as if they hadn't just been discussing John's murder. “I think everybody's pretty excited that Russ Tiller is going to be there.”

“I can't wait to meet him,” said Angie's mother, clasping her hands together like a schoolgirl before meeting the prom king.

Freeman and Patricia just looked at each other. She raised her eyebrows.

“Angie, you never mentioned Tiller would be there,” said Patricia.

“I wanted it to be a surprise. Helen told me not to tell anybody. Secret Service, you know. But since you're in the car, you can't let the secret out.”

“She didn't tell me, either,” said Freeman.

“Oh, Amos, if I’d told you the former President of the United States was going to be at your sister’s party, you’d never have gotten in this car,” Angie scoffed.

“Maybe at the next light I could slip out,” Freeman smiled, looking at Patricia.

“Oh, Amos! That’s just enough,” said Angie. “He’s impossible,” she said to Patricia, who just smiled at her.

“And Meredith is going to be with him, and so is Chloe,” Angie let out with a squeal.

“Oh, Jesus. Throw me under a bus, please,” said Freeman.

Going to Helen’s place was bad enough, but to be forced to endure the ex-President, his wife Meredith who had very serious Presidential ambitions herself, as well as their buck-toothed daughter Chloe Tiller, was just about more than Freeman could stand.

He had actually voted for Tiller many years back, but when scandal after scandal engulfed him, Freeman lost all interest in politics. It seemed like every hand Tiller shook had cash in it after he left office.

After leaving the White House, Tiller had moved to New York and launched a Foundation that took in more money per year than the budgets of a lot of Third World countries. Everybody gave this guy money, from rich individuals, to Fortune 500 companies to foreign governments. The fact that he was a former President, his wife a former secretary of state and as well as a future candidate for President, meant they offered all these people “access.” Access to what exactly, Freeman wasn’t sure, but basically Tiller was almost as powerful as an ex-President as he had been when he was President.

There was one slight difference, however. Now he was rich.

His in-laws and Angie were babbling on about the Tillers.

“He’s done so much for Haiti, you know? And he travels all over the world,” said his mother-in-law.

“Making half a million a speech,” said Freeman.

“Oh, Amos,” said the mother-in-law, “you’re so cynical.”

“Hey, if I’d had Air Force One for eight years, I’d hate flying commercial, too,” said Freeman.

When they arrived at the building on 64th Street, there was a bit of extra security, with Secret Service agents at the entrance and by the elevators. They got through the checkpoints in good order and into an elevator that whisked them up to Helen and Bertram Eglamore’s penthouse duplex.

Angie’s parents were suitably impressed with the money on display in the lavish apartment. They were visiting from the Midwest and had never been to Helen’s before. Freeman’s parents had come over earlier that afternoon to spend time with Helen, and had been shuttling between Freeman’s modest house in Brooklyn and Helen’s more spacious digs.

Freeman’s mother came over and kissed him and Angie, and then Patricia. (She’d known Patricia quite well, or so she thought.) More expressions of sympathy.

“I shouldn’t be here,” Patricia said to Freeman in a moment alone.

“Hey, you need a break. Try to relax.”

He wanted to squeeze her hand, but of course he didn’t.

Helen came rushing up, as bubbly as a glass of Champagne, and just about as long lasting. She had perfectly coifed dyed blonde hair. She sparkled, each arm wave or turn of the neck a glittering exhibition of Fifth Avenue wares from the likes of Harry Winston, David Webb, Van Cleef.

Helen offered Freeman an air kiss somewhere near the cheek, then stood back and looked at the outfit Freeman was wearing, a nondescript suit.

“*It’s New Year’s Eve, Amos!* For Christ’s sake, you look like you just came from the office!”

“Well, I did put in a few hours today.”

Helen didn’t even hear him, turning now to Patricia. More expressions of sympathy.

“You know, Patricia, I’m so glad Angie invited you to the party. We need to cheer you up.”

Freeman was furious with Helen, who seemed to be giving John’s death the same importance as a pet dog Patricia might have had to put down because it had kidney disease.

Before she could go on, Helen’s husband, Bertram Eglamore, came up behind her and gave her a little squeeze at the waist.

Helen giggled one of those phony giggles women giggle when men do things like that. Freeman was sure it was all crap, but then, what wasn’t? Why did they encourage women to act like assholes?

“Hi, Bert,” said Freeman.

Eglamore gave Freeman a firm shake of the hand.

“So good to see you again, Amos,” Bert said in his clipped British accent. He turned immediately to Patricia. “And this must be Patricia.” She took Eglamore’s extended hand. “Our thoughts have been with you all week. Helen and I are so happy you could join us.”

“Thank you,” said Patricia.

Eglamore spread his arms and welcomed the in-laws and Angie and some new arrivals streaming in after them. He had an affable air. His grayish hair was thinning, but he was trim and fit, his eye revealing a sharpness that his tony accent somewhat blunted. As smooth as he impressed you when you met him, he also had the aura about him that gave you the feeling he could eat your lunch in the blink of an eye.

“You’ll want to meet President Tiller, of course,” said Helen. “He’s in the other room with Meredith and Chloe.”

“How’d you get him here without charging your guests five grand a head?”

Bert gave him a look.

“He’s a personal friend, Amos.”

“Oh, I see.”

“*Everyone,*” Eglamore raised his voice, “*everyone to the bar!*”

“We’ve enclosed the terrace this year,” Helen explained to Angie’s parents, “so we can use it all year. It’s got a retractable roof. Wait’ll you see the view, even in the winter.”

Freeman watched Angie and her parents drift away with Helen and the others toward the enclosed terrace.

“Quite a spread,” Patricia commented.

“Helen met Bert when she was in real estate. He was renting a big apartment on Fifth Avenue because he was spending so much time in the city.”

“You already told me he was English. Seems like a nice enough guy.”

“He was a top guy in an English hedge fund. Made a fortune, kept his greed in check and got a lot of cash out before things started falling apart. His son still runs the London operation. Helen and Bert don’t have any kids. She’s two years older than me. Been married to Bert for five or six years. He’s fifty-five. Quite a catch. Hey, there’s always a guy serving drinks in the library. Unless, of course you want to meet Tiller.”

“I’ll take the library, though I have to admit I always wanted to meet Meredith in person.”

“We’ll get a drink and then you can get Meredith’s autograph.”

He and Patricia drifted to the other end of the apartment away from the living room and the terrace, their heels clicking on marble floors, passing 18th Century consoles, Chippendale armchairs, gilt mirrors.

“Pretty swanky,” Patricia nodded.

“Don’t kid yourself. Helen doesn’t have any more taste than I do. She has this expensive decorator. She can’t tell the difference between a Colonial wing-back chair and a Louis Sixteenth chaise. She told me that over lunch one day at the Pierre. At the Pierre, right? I’d come from chasing a bad guy down an alley and I got some dirt on my pants. Should’a seen the look on the faggot maitre d’. Had to flash my badge to get in the fucking dump.”

Patricia giggled. Couldn’t help herself.

“I love you,” she whispered as they passed into the library, an imposing two-storied affair, all gleaming rich mahogany throwing off a subdued glow coming from the fireplace across the room, where a roaring blaze burned brightly.

There was an equally imposing bar on one side of the room, opposite the twin spiral staircases that snaked up to the second floor gallery. The room was empty except for the man behind the bar.

“I’ll have a white wine,” said Freeman.

Patricia looked at him sharply.

“What are you saving it for?”

“All right,” he said, a smile creeping into his tight expression. “Jack Daniels on the rocks, bartender.”

“And I’ll have that very fine Grgich Hills Pinot Noir,” said Patricia, looking at the red wines lined up behind the bartender.

They got their drinks and moved across the room to stand, their backs to the fire.

“Nothing like a fire in a New York City apartment,” said Patricia with a warm smile as she took a long drink from the Pinot Noir and smacked her lips. “Very nice.”

Freeman arched an eyebrow.

“They have a wine guy, too.”

“And a cook?”

“Of course. Helen can’t cook without Hamburger Helper. But then, neither can I.”

“When am I gonna see you again?”

Freeman breathed out.

“I dunno. As soon as I can. Let’s just get through the funeral.”

“I know, I know. I feel like a shit as it is.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Thing is, with me and John it was over, had been over. I’d already stopped having those kind of feelings for him, so when it happened to him, I had the kind of reaction you might have if it’d happened to

someone who used to be a real good friend but you hadn't seen in a while. Y'know?"

"Yeah."

"Not like someone you were sleeping with. Someone who was the father of your kids."

"Yeah."

"Everybody's so sorry for me. Me, I'm sorry for the twins, they're all I think about. And you. And starting over."

Eglamore and Helen strolled in with the British ambassador to the U.N. and his wife, as well as President Tiller and Meredith.

"You see, Mr. Ambassador, we have an extensive collection of first editions of Rudyard Kipling that I think you'll find particularly interesting."

Bert stopped by the bar to pick up glasses of Veuve Cliquot for the ambassador and his wife.

"And for you, Mr. President?"

"Just San Pellegrino, thanks," said Tiller.

"Meredith?"

"Pellegrino," Meredith smiled.

When you were running for President, you had to let people call you by your first name, Freeman thought. Anything for that vote.

Bert led them all over to some shelves to the left of the fireplace. Freeman and Patricia edged out of the way.

"Kipling is a special favorite of my husband's," said Mrs. Ambassador, daintily sipping from her glass.

The ambassador very smugly offered: "I used to be able to recite all of Gunga Din."

"How does it end, dear?"

Freeman rolled his eyes.

The ambassador took in a full and hearty breath and piped out in a stentorian voice:

“ ‘Though I’ve belted you and flayed you, / By the livin’ Gawd that made you, / You’re a better man than I am, Gunga Din!’ ”

“Very famous lines,” said Helen, catching Freeman’s eye as Freeman made a show of choking on his drink.

Everyone looked his way.

“Don’t forget to show them your collection of Danielle Steels.”

Nobody smiled, except Patricia and Tiller, and they both hid it.

“Very funny, Amos,” said Helen.

Freeman could see the spot on one of Helen’s front teeth where she’d chipped it when Freeman hit her when they were kids. The most expensive cosmetic dentists in New York somehow couldn’t get the color right, and now (their mother told Freeman) Helen was thinking of just getting veneers on all her teeth.

Eglamore broke the silence that followed.

“This is Amos Freeman, and Patricia McTaggart.”

“Awfully sorry to hear about your husband, Patricia,” said Tiller.

This guy was good, thought Freeman. He knew all about Patricia.

There were mumbled expressions of sympathy.

“Thank you, Mr. President,” said Patricia.

“Mr. Ambassador, if you’ll follow me, I’d like to show you my collection of rare autographs.”

As the others trailed out, Helen remained behind with their mother.

“Always something snarky to say.”

“Sorry, Helen. I couldn’t help it. Gunga Din?”

“Kids,” their mother interrupted. “Stop it.” Freeman’s mother was sixty-one, a tough woman with silver hair and a no-nonsense manner.

Helen shook her head in mild disgust and took off after the others. Her mother turned to Freeman and Patricia.

“We’re going to be coming back to your house, Amos,” she said. “As soon as Angie’s parents go home.”

“We’ll have a lot more room then,” Freeman said.

His mother lowered her voice and leaned in to them.

“You know that Charles Kolsnar character that’s on the loose?”

“I know plenty about him—except where he is,” said Freeman.

“He and his wife, Loretta, were invited to the party tonight.”

“You’re kidding,” said Freeman.

His mother nodded, her eyes widening.

“Helen’s a good friend of hers.”

“Wow,” Freeman said quietly.

“Of course, she wouldn’t dare come out so soon after the scandal.”

“No,” said Freeman.

While the whole world now knew that Charlie Kolsnar had stolen \$200 million in bonds, they didn’t know that this same guy had also shot Randolph Gerard (some thought the robbers shot him) and also that he killed John McTaggart. His mother didn’t know. Patricia didn’t know. Freeman had kept this to himself.

“As big as Manhattan is, it’s still a small world.”

“It certainly is,” said Patricia. “Imagine that, Helen knowing the wife of the guy who stole the bonds.”

There was a slight pause and then his mother giggled.

“You know, those Danielle Steel books are *everywhere*. All the bathrooms upstairs. And Nora Roberts.”

“Let’s go out and look at the view,” said Patricia.

“Sure,” Freeman said, and followed the girls out into the wide marble hallway leading to the foyer and on to the drawing room where there was a grand piano with a cocktail cavalier tinkling away at the keys.

Out on the terrace, Chloe Tiller was in a heated discussion with someone about the outcome of the current election.

Everybody in America (except perhaps Amos Freeman) was transfixed by the drama unfolding in Washington right now. In just three days, the new Congress was set to convene and because there had been a tie for President in the Electoral College in November’s election, the

House of Representatives was set to vote to determine who the next President would be.

The candidates were the Republican Governor Sam Houston St. Clair of Florida and Democratic Senator Frederick Thurston of Massachusetts.

“Well, of course, my dad is going to Washington tomorrow for some last-minute meetings Thurston has set up for him,” Chloe was saying when they walked out.

“It’s vitally important that Senator Thurston win over St. Clair,” said Meredith without about as much conviction as someone ordering toilet paper at a drug store.

Everybody knew that if Thurston won, she couldn’t run for President until he left office, which in all likelihood would be eight long years. If St. Clair managed to beat Thurston, Meredith could run against him in four years.

Here she was reduced to trumpeting the party line. She couldn’t be against her own party. Well, she couldn’t *say* she was against it. Very difficult position, but then the Tillers always found themselves in difficult positions that they somehow wiggled out of.

Over his shoulder, Freeman heard Russ Tiller talking to Bert.

“We’ll have to get together about that business in London, Bert.”

“We will, Mr. President. Helen and I are heading down to Lyford Cay for a few days out of the cold, just before the Inaugural. Our London business will be there. We might make a lot of progress if you could join us.”

“Will the prince be there, or just Loomis?”

“I understand both of them will be there.”

“I love Lyford. I was down there last winter for a fundraiser for the Foundation.”

“I wish you could join us,” said Bert. “The Bahamas are nice this time of year.”

“Let me know the dates. I have to go to Washington tomorrow, be there before the big vote on the third.”

“They say it’s pretty much tied.”

“I think Fred Thurston will pull it out, maybe by as many as five votes.”

“I’m friends with St. Clair,” said Bert.

“You have some mining interests with him, right?” said Tiller.

“Yes, I have an interest in a mine St. Clair owns with Jonathan Vaughan.”

“I know Jonathan. That’s his old business partner’s son. The gay one.”

“That’s right.”

“I’d like to have lunch with him someday.”

“I can arrange that.”

“I need to get him to help out with our Foundation. We’re very supportive of gay rights.”

To Freeman, this meant he wanted Jonathan Vaughan to give his Foundation a six-figure donation.

“I’m sure he’d be delighted.”

“I’ve met his wife, Pat. They used to be part of the Washington social scene till he ran off with that Latin boyfriend of his.”

“That’s correct. The boyfriend works at the U.N. Salvadoran mission.”

“You know, Bert, let me have those dates. I want to join you in the Bahamas, have a meeting with Prince Ibn.”

“I could send my plane, Mr. President. You meet with Ibn and Loomis and I’ll have you flown back in time for the Inaugural.”

“OK, I’ll give you a call.”

“Would you like something other than the Pellegrino?”

“Maybe a little Champagne, but only since it’s New Year’s Eve,” Tiller laughed.

“Follow me, Mr. President.”

As they made their way past Freeman, Tiller paused and leaned over to him and spoke in a low voice.

“That was very funny what you said about the Danielle Steels, Amos,” he said with a smile.

“Thank you, Mr. President.”

Tiller followed Bert into the living room.

How could you not like this guy? Freeman thought. He really had a personal touch. Even remembered his name, and he was a Nobody.

Freeman tapped his mother and Patricia on the shoulder. They turned away from Chloe as she rattled on.

“Let me buy you girls a New Year’s drink.”

He put one arm around each of the women and led them to the bar.

“I’ll want a kiss with that, Amos,” said Freeman’s mother.

“I have one for each of you,” he replied, giving his mom a kiss on the cheek and then giving one to Patricia as well, but lingering just a little longer.

All Freeman could think was how great she smelled.

In the back of his mind, however, he was thinking of something else; not who the next President would be, but the little chat he wanted to have with Loretta Kolsnar.

# Chapter 11

*January 1 – 11:18 A.M.*

Manny Branch was no ordinary human being. Not any more.

He realized as he drove the black van into New York that he was different from other men now.

Special.

Distinct.

Apart.

All his life he'd wanted to be different from other men. He wanted to be special. Above them. To have done something they couldn't, wouldn't or shouldn't do.

Even as a little boy he hated being "ordinary." Growing up in Queens, it was hard not to be ordinary. Everybody was the same.

And he'd hated it. Hated the life his parents gave him. Hated the tiny row house they lived in. Hated his neighbors—who were all alike. Hated his school, where they tried to squeeze the pulp of your individuality out of you as if you were an overripe orange.

As a kid he'd wanted to grow up to be a mercenary soldier. To do something daring, exciting, thrilling, dangerous. Something *different*. In all his life the only thing he'd really searched for was the single avenue that would take him down a different path from the one traveled by the mass of mankind. Most of all he hated the futility of the drab lives his parents lived. Working in a factory, protected by the union—what was the challenge of it all? Where was the thrill? The rush of adrenaline? The excitement?

It did not matter to him that the world *know* he was different and special. Oh, at first it mattered—when he was just a kid. He wanted to be someone the world looked up to—or at the very least feared and re-

spected. But as he got older and matured, he realized he would be happy without public recognition. In the end, it only mattered to *him* that he was different. *He* had to know. He reasoned it this way: if the lives of the mass of mankind were unimportant and boring, what did it matter what *they* thought of you? What you thought of yourself was the only thing that counted.

As a teenager, reading about crime in the newspapers fascinated him—to such an extent, he understood later on—that it changed his life. If someone had the guts to murder someone or rob a bank, that someone was Special.

Special because he was *different*. Most people wouldn't do things like that. They were afraid. And he couldn't admit to that kind of weak-bellied fear. It was ridiculous to him. Unmanly.

He got out of high school and went into the Army. The Second Iraq War was just heating up then, and he wanted to be a part of it. There seemed no need to become a mercenary if your own country was busy fighting a war. You could test your manhood and at the same time be patriotic.

Once in Iraq, he saw how everybody treated the Special Forces units. Before his second tour of duty, he went back and got accepted into the rigorous training program, soon finding himself attached to an elite demolitions unit. Blowing up those lousy bridges in Iraq wasn't much to brag about, though. It was only a challenge when the unit was under heavy fire. Snipers didn't bother him. He figured he had it worked out with God. God simply wouldn't let an Iraqi terrorist shoot him between the eyes. But heavy fire did excite him. Adrenalin pumped furiously through him when he was in water under a bridge and the enemy was trying to get at him from the other shore. It even made him horny. He remembered more than one time coming out of the water with a hard-on that wouldn't go away for twenty minutes. Danger was sexy to him.

It was a long war to many people. Not to Manny. He reveled in every aspect of it, loved every minute of it. He was over there about six years.

When he took leave, it was usually to Amsterdam. Never home. When his parents died (they were old when he was born), his C.O. told him to go home. But he didn't. He took the time and went whoring and drinking in Amsterdam, spending \$20,572.16 in ten days. He loved the Army. He knew deep down he was giving everything he had to the Army, but the way he saw it, the Army'd given him a lot back in return.

He stayed in Iraq for four tours, almost as long as they would let him. After a brief hiatus back in the States, he did two tours to Afghanistan. By then, he had to decide whether he was going to be a lifer in the armed forces, or move on to new challenges.

Once home, he took stock.

Family: an aunt in South Dakota he'd met when he was eight. He never called her.

Money: a monthly check from the Feds that took care of basic needs. He could scrimp by and not work.

But he couldn't sit still.

He had a couple of friends—also Vets—who had crummy jobs and shared the same dissatisfactions festering in him, all of which boiled down to a yearning for excitement, an element woefully missing from their current lives.

One night out drinking, one of them suggested they hit an all-night convenience store to get a little cash. They had been complaining about money (and more important, boredom) all evening, and it seemed like a good idea at the time. In retrospect, considering all that had happened since, it still seemed like a good idea.

So they hit it, getting away Scot free with about \$900. Split three ways, it was the quickest and less painful \$300 any of them had ever made, so they did it again a week later. It was so easy it was impossible

to stop. They moved up to small shops in daylight, drug stores at night, and they never fired a single shot in all that time.

Eventually, one of his buddies bowed out, and nobody had any hard feelings. He decided he just didn't want to do it anymore. He was afraid something serious might happen. (Meaning armed robbery wasn't serious—someday being involved in a murder was serious). Manny and his other friends kept it up, hitting places once, sometimes twice a week.

They hit a couple of branch banks in the Connecticut suburbs and got away with those easily enough, but it was scarier work—and thus more exciting. Also, once you start fucking with banks, the Feds get involved.

One night, though, after knocking over a convenience store, they walked out onto the street and a patrol car drove right past them. It was a bad scene all around. Manny's partner was just putting his gun away, the cops saw it, stopped, nailed them pat.

Manny did six months in the state pen. Although it was technically a first offense, the prosecution convinced the court Branch and his friends were involved in a couple of other holdups.

Manny didn't mind doing the time. He was an experienced Special Forces guy, had kept in superb physical shape, and could easily take care of himself, though he was only half an inch over the minimum height to qualify for Special Ops. The prison term was a slight blow to his pride, that was all.

After the first month in the slammer, he was horny beyond belief. He found out quickly enough that other men were attracted to him, if not for his pretty face, for his perfectly toned body. Not that there was a whole lot of choice when you were locked up. Still, he knew these guys would have liked him out of jail as well as they did in jail. He was very dark-skinned, and came from the kind of family with such a muddy ancestry that he'd never been sure where he got his perennially healthy-looking dark skin. (Sometimes he wore a mustache—it was thick and

dark). His hair was so brown it almost looked black. There was no question about his eyes: they were bottomless black pools, fathomless, often emotionless, not cool—just empty. He got his cock sucked by willing inmates, and that was okay—but his mind wasn't into what his body had to accept. Later, his attitude about that changed as well.

When he got out, he fell into smoking crack. All the time in prison, he'd successfully avoided drugs. Looked down on the other inmates who did drugs, actually. But oddly, once out, he fell into a kind of mild despair, a malaise, and he just drifted into drugs. After living such a disciplined life, even in jail, this surprised him, but there it was: suddenly his government check went to drug dealers and crack whores.

He actually had to look for a job, he went through his monthly check so fast. The only job he could get—or found, anyway—was back in Queens in a laundry. It wasn't anything to write home about—he operated a noisy machine that pressed and folded shirts. It was drudgery. Worse than anything he'd ever done. No money. No future. The little place was a pressure cooker in the summer, with only a little window by his machine with one of those huge fans that sucked the air out of the building, pushing it through lint encrusted blades that hadn't been cleaned in years. That was the only breeze he got.

Before long he got together with a guy he'd known in prison and was back on the street hitting convenience stores and the like. He was caught again, and sent up for a year this time. Back to the same stinking can.

He adjusted to prison life with more ease this time up. He could accept everything more readily. He had his cock sucked all the time and fucked a lot of ass, but he still didn't think of himself as queer or anything. He made some of the guys up there mad, but he could always handle them. Iraq had made him cool and disciplined, and he took that toughness with him to the can. And survived.

He spent a good bit of time with Dr. Harold White, the prison shrink. White asked him lots of questions. Manny answered

him—falsely at first, but eventually with a good deal of frankness. How could it matter? Still, he didn't tell White too much. White had his own opinions, Manny thought, and would draw whatever conclusions he wanted to anyway. It didn't matter. Nothing did. Except survival.

Since it was his second time around, he was made to go in for a good bit of counseling, and not just from White. A lot of the guys with white collars—God's boys on earth—were around. They all did a little counseling to help mankind—that was the way Manny figured they saw themselves.

It was at one such counseling session, in fact, that he met the Reverend Richard Whitney.

Branch couldn't remember whether it was the third or fourth "counseling session" when Whitney's hand brushed against his thigh, then lingered that split second too long when you knew it was a come-on. Branch had found Whitney's delicacy, oh, amusing at the time, given the slightly less subtle techniques use by inmates when they hit on him. He remembered he'd looked up sharply at Whitney, catching his eye as Whitney's hand moved away. He made an instant decision to encourage the guy—he didn't quite know why—with a coy smile and a naïve blinking of the eye. Somewhere in the back of his mind he must have thought this guy might be useful to him, help him out in some way.

After several more sessions (they were always in a room alone and the guards never looked in), it became clear to Branch that Father Whitney actually had a crush on him.

Before long, they were stealing kisses, and Branch confessed to having "urges" not satisfied with the sex he was getting from his fellow inmates. Whitney promised to do everything in his power to see that Branch was granted early parole, even if he had to put his name on the line personally. Branch remembered smiling at Whitney, swallowing him whole with his big black eyes, like a shark eating a sea otter.

He did a little research when he qualified for some computer time—thanks again to Father Whitney—and discovered that the place where Whitney worked, Trinity, was one of the richest congregations in the United States.

## Chapter 12

*January 2 – 2:10 P.M.*

Freeman came out of the building he would be calling headquarters for the course of the investigation—brimming with disgust at the ineptitude of politicians who looked at the business of solving great crimes as nothing more than easy rungs up the ladder of power and influence.

He had just come from the first full meeting of the staff that would be involved in the investigation—a staff of two hundred twenty-three officers, and bound to grow larger. He, as well as two hundred twenty-two others (including, by the way, Rafaela Salguero), were now officially assigned to Case No. 497284. Because of the special nature of the case, and the inordinate attention it was getting in the press, both local and national, it was given a special code-name:

Operation Trinity.

*Has a nice ring to it,* thought Freeman.

Over a hundred reporters from around the country descended on the special headquarters—set up under one roof so the entire staff could work together and have immediate access to one another. Everyone involved in Operation Trinity had been detached by special order of the commissioner and assigned to the case.

It was all just a lot of paperwork to Freeman.

A case was a case was a case.

But the press had been a real bitch to contend with. Cameras and mikes were everywhere, people rushing and shoving, yelling, wanting to know this, that, this, that, this, that and this. The investigation was rapidly, in Freeman's not-so-humble opinion, becoming a circus, just as he'd predicted.

The organizational meeting was chaired by Deputy Mayor Theodore Marlton, and was attended by the commissioner, Fatty Fowler and all the other hot trotters. Freeman figured that, left to his own devices and initiative, Fatty Fowler could get the necessary balls rolling in a matter of hours. But, having to consult with Marlton on everything, Fowler would not really get things hopping for a week or more. The bigger the investigation, the more cumbersome it was, that's all Freeman knew.

But he was a free agent on this one, and he could do as he damn well pleased. He had been ignored by the administrative staff when duties were parceled out and subordinate staffs were formed. He remembered the uncomfortable look Marlton had given him as the announcements were made by Chief Fowler. No one asked Freeman to stay around for a meeting afterward, so he split—right after he checked with Fowler's clerk about an office. The clerk had said, "You're assigned to Office 8-D." The clerk also told him that he was not being assigned to any particular department of Operation Trinity's staff—he was to report personally to the chief in a couple of days ("couple of days"—that sounded just like Fowler—Freeman loved it) for further instructions. Freeman asked the clerk about access to information, routing procedures, etc., and the clerk said, "You're getting copies of every report—" the clerk glanced at a paper "—by order of the mayor himself."

The clerk was suitably impressed.

So was Freeman.

That was that.

And *that*—he hoped—was all he needed or could ask for.

The mayor had seen to it that he would get what he needed, and that he wouldn't have to clear every God damn little thing with somebody higher up—not even Chief Fowler. (That was why Marlton had been looking at him so uncomfortably during the big meeting).

Now Freeman was on his way to Trinity Church—not far from City Hall—to see Parkhurst. Freeman had been on the scene when that

Quigley guy came to tell Parkhurst about the vestry meeting the next (Christmas) morning. Freeman had been at Gracie Mansion when that took place, so now he wanted to talk to Parkhurst alone and follow up.

He pulled up on the side of Trinity Church and left his car in a “No Parking Tow Away” zone—after all these years he still loved leaving his car where other people couldn’t.

Going to the rear of the church, he found his way into the highly polished corridors of the offices behind the sanctuary and eventually into Parkhurst’s antechamber. A secretary was there behind a desk, talking to Richard Whitney, Parkhurst’s dedicated young assistant that Freeman remembered from the night of the crime.

“Hello, Lieutenant. I remember you,” Whitney said.

“Always nice to be remembered. Can I see Mr. Parkhurst?”

“He’s tied up right now in a vestry meeting,” Whitney said tightly.

“It’s pretty important,” he smiled.

“He’s awfully tied up.”

“Then I’ll wait for him.”

“Fine, Lieutenant, fine.” Whitney turned to the secretary. “Would you copy these for me, Alice?” he asked, handing her some papers.

“Certainly, Father.” She rose and left the room.

When she had gone, Whitney’s expression took on a more anxious sense of urgency.

“Lieutenant, Father Parkhurst has been under a great deal of stress already. Two detectives interviewed him Christmas Day, and it drained him considerably. Now he’s up to his ears with the vestry.”

“I thought they had a meeting Christmas Day.”

“They did. But they’re having *another* one.” He nodded toward the closed door.

“Well, I can understand the strain—the robbery, his daughter—it’s got to be tough—but I have to see him personally. I’m working directly under the mayor on this case. It’s important.”

"I just feel so sorry for him. He's been through so much the last year and a half."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it all started with Janie—his daughter."

"I know who she is," Freeman pointed out. He could tell Whitney was worried to distraction about his master's well-being.

"She was a terrible insult to the integrity and public image of the church."

Freeman drew out his pack of Winstons and lit up a cigarette.

"Sorry, Lieutenant, there's no smoking in here these days," said Whitney.

"There's no smoking *anywhere* these days," Freeman said.

"Come this way," said Whitney, and he followed him outside into the old cemetery yard behind the church where Freeman fired up a cigarette.

"Going back to Janie: I guess lesbians aren't the greatest for the PR side of religion."

He saw how the snide remark affected Whitney, who looked at him resentfully. It was pretty obvious that Whitney himself was gay, which was why he expected him to have a *little* sense of humor. Wrong. Freeman nodded.

"I'm sorry. Didn't mean to be cute. I feel sorry for Mr. Parkhurst, too. He's obviously in a bad, bad way."

Whitney fiddled with the ornate gold cross hanging around his neck and stepped closer to him, looking over his shoulder, though they were quite alone in the brisk wind of a clear winter day. Only ghosts hovered nearby.

"So many in the parish have turned against him—like Ed Quigley—and now they all blame him *personally* for what Janie's done to the reputation of the church," he said in a low voice.

"He can't control her?"

"No. Not in the slightest way. She's very independent."

“Yeah—*that’s* pretty obvious.”

“But Father Parkhurst’s problems are more complicated than just Janie. About a year ago, he was passed over to be bishop of New York—a post, I don’t mind telling you, Lieutenant, that he deserved more than any priest in the Diocese.”

“Why was he passed over?”

“Oh, Janie was a problem—ruined Trinity’s image and Father Parkhurst’s reputation as well—and there was a tough fight from a younger man, Arthur Little of Albany. He’s now bishop. He was younger, more aggressive, more socially oriented—and he used Janie against Father Parkhurst rather mercilessly. Nothing out in the open, mind you, but quietly, behind the scenes, and very effectively.”

“Wow,” Freeman said quietly.

“After they elected Little as bishop, Father Parkhurst became very moody and introspective. Wouldn’t talk much. Devoted a great deal of time to counseling work. Sat in his office thinking quietly, seeing few people.”

“Sounds bad.”

“It was terrible, and very hard being around him. He brightened a few months ago—a bit—but his moods were on and off, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“Then things heated up again—and there was a rumor that filtered out of the vestry about requesting the bishop to move Father Parkhurst to another parish—somewhere upstate.”

“Out to pasture, you mean.”

“Just that—out to pasture.” Whitney had lost a lot of sleep over Parkhurst—Freeman could tell. He was genuinely concerned about the man.

“Pity,” Freeman sympathized.

“He really should have been named bishop. He’s getting on in years—and he won’t be able to give much more service to the Church.

He deserved it. He even expected he'd get it. Many rectors of Trinity Church have gone on to become bishop of the Diocese.

"It's a famous church."

"Infamous now—in some people's opinion. Oh, what a mess the whole thing is."

Whitney was near to crying, Freeman thought.

They made their way back into the office where the secretary had returned with the copies he'd wanted.

"Thanks, Alice."

Just then a door opened and the vestry came out. As if responding to a cue, the other door—through which Freeman had come—opened and Bishop Arthur Little entered with a small entourage.

The vestry poured into the antechamber and Bishop Little instantly started mingling with the members of the vestry, chatting amicably, patting backs, shaking hands—in that way politicians do when they shake your hand with their right and hold your forearm with their left. Freeman stood to one side with Whitney—out of the way—but not out of earshot.

"I can't believe what happened," Little was saying in a carrying voice to Edward Quigley. "We tightened security the day I assumed my duties at Diocesan House. You can never know what sort of terrorists might charge in and try to use me and my staff as hostages for some alleged wrong done them by society. I'm amazed that Father Parkhurst did not have more security personnel on duty Christmas Eve."

Parkhurst had edged his way out of the Vestry Meeting Room into the spacious antechamber, but had not heard Little's remark. Little immediately walked over to him, extending his hand. Quigley, Freeman noticed, followed him over.

"I wish to extend to you my sincere condolences, Em. I have never heard of a more dreadful and inhuman calamity in my life—"

Parkhurst cut him off with a voice that was lofty and reserved.

“I read the statement that you issued to the press, Bishop Little. I am certain that the entire congregation receives your expression of sympathy and understanding with heartfelt thanks.”

Freeman raised his eyebrows. The old man could speak with the cold grandeur of an official City Hall bulletin worked on by four PR guys for three hours. Little was taken aback by the formality of Parkhurst’s tone and diction, but he was game, Freeman thought. This Little guy didn’t get to be bishop of New York because he was slow on his feet.

“It would be my great honor to say a few words at the funerals,” he said respectfully.

“I had planned to officiate at those ceremonies, Bishop.”

“And you will, of course, Em. As bishop, however, I consider it to be my sacred duty to stand by your side to honor the parishioners who died in this tragic affair.”

That was that, thought Freeman. He could tell Parkhurst hadn’t wanted to let Little use the funerals of those murdered during the robbery as a media event to aggrandize himself.

“May I talk to you, Bishop?” Quigley interjected at this stage.

“Certainly, Ed,” Bishop Little said, looking over his shoulder at Quigley, who took the bishop by the elbow and led him out through the main door.

Whitney leaned over to Freeman, whispering, “He probably wants to ask the bishop to remove Parkhurst as rector.”

“How do you know?” Freeman whispered back conspiratorially.

“I don’t, definitely. But I have a feeling,” Whitney said softly. “I’m certain the vestry hinted at such action in the meeting. Father Parkhurst looks like he’s seen the Devil incarnate.”

“Just a ‘Little’ problem,” Freeman cracked.

Whitney didn’t laugh.

Freeman looked over towards Parkhurst. The old man *was* a little green around the gills, all right, his face tight, mouth clenched. No one

in the room talked to him. He stood alone in his black somber suit, his white collar the only thing standing out. He looked remote in the crowded room, alone, forsaken, emotionally destitute and ravaged.

And in *his* church.

Here was not a man in the pink, thought Freeman. He damned himself, then and there, for thinking something so off-hand and cute about a man whose world was crumbling around him. As rector of Trinity Church, Freeman knew, Parkhurst enjoyed a high stature in the Episcopal Church of New York, second only to the bishop himself. He was highly respected, a privileged member of the upper class in only the way an Episcopalian minister could be. Methodists (like Freeman), Presbyterians and Baptists—and their sort—had no entry into *real* society. Not the way an Episcopalian minister had.

So fall the mighty, Freeman thought genuinely. He didn't envy Parkhurst his former respect in the congregation and the community—he'd never wanted that kind of stuff—it was all shit to him—but he did feel sorry for a man like Parkhurst when he lost it all after so many years of having it and expecting it. He'd become accustomed to his rank in society, and to lose it all now, at his age—well, you had to feel sorry for him.

Freeman wandered among the milling vestry, who were talking to each other in dark tones about the crime and its effect on Trinity, and stood behind Whitney.

"Do you have any instructions for me, Father Parkhurst?" Whitney was asking.

"Did you know," Parkhurst said softly to Whitney, not looking at him, but looking straight ahead, speaking out of the corner of his mouth, "that you often have the bearing and attitude of an aide-de-camp?"

"I'm sorry, Father," Whitney said, dropping his head in what looked to Freeman like shame. Whitney was no more than Parkhurst's dog, running at his heels, trying hard to please.

"I'm sorry for that remark, Richard. It was uncalled for." Parkhurst sighed, "but I guess we really are at war—in a way—and I need a good aide-de-camp," he added, looking around to him. In so doing, he saw Freeman. "May I help you?" he asked. Whitney looked up, startled—someone had wrecked his master's train of thought.

Time to earn the old salary, Freeman thought.

"Yes, Mr. Parkhurst. I'm Lieutenant Freeman, and—"

"I remember who you are, Lieutenant. You performed your duty admirably on Christmas Eve."

"Thank you, sir." Clearing his throat. "I know it must be a bad time, but I have to speak with you. A few questions—"

"Now is *not* the time, Lieutenant. I'm not quite up to an interrogation at this moment. I've given two statements already. If you wish further elaboration of those statements, you will have to wait until tomorrow."

Again that lofty reserve, that coolness Freeman *did* envy in Parkhurst. This guy acted like—and you *believed*—he'd broken bread with God. What could a mere detective lieutenant say?

"I'll come back later, sir."

"Thank you Lieutenant. I am mindful of your consideration, and most thankful for it."

Freeman nodded and left the room quietly. How could he argue? He walked the long way out through the corridors back to the sanctuary and out into the winter sun, wondering how the hell he was going to break the case when he couldn't even get through to the Good Guys.

## Chapter 13

*January 4 – 1:25 P.M.*

Charlie Kolsnar glanced at the front of his old office building as he strolled up Wall Street. He was walking up the *other* side of the street today dressed in his work boots, overalls, peacoat, and wearing his shaggy brown wig. Though he knew many of the men and women who commonly walked down the Money Mile, he was confident that no one would recognize him with the high collar of his peacoat turned up and shaggy hair protruding above it. Those who might have recognized him would be certain to ignore a man bundled up in a peacoat and wearing a laborer's pants and shoes.

The soot-covered facade of Trinity Church loomed up before him. He stretched his neck back to look up the tapering spire. The famous bronze doors were open wide—which was normal during the day. His lips were pressed tightly together as he thought about Christmas Eve. He shook his head, finding it difficult to believe and accept the comic irony behind his loss of the bonds.

Kolsnar turned and walked uptown on Broadway, thinking. He'd read in the papers about the take: his two hundred million in bonds added quite substantially to what was an impressive haul in diamonds and other precious gems to begin with.

Now would be the hardest part—waiting. Waiting for the men who took the bonds to make their first move. *Then* he would be able to make his move.

Now all he could do was pass the word to his contacts in the black market, men with one foot in the underworld and one foot on Fifth Avenue, men he'd dealt with many times before, men whose pockets he'd filled with kiss-and-tell money on previous occasions when he needed information to recover bonds for Gerard, Nugent & Co.

He slipped into the subway and got out on Lexington Avenue a few blocks from Gramercy Park.

He stepped into a diner and sat at the counter to warm himself and to get a cup of coffee. The TV bolted to the wall above the cashier was turned in to CNN where the anchors talked relentlessly about the surprise resolution of the Presidential race the day before when some unknown first-term congressman from Wyoming had cast the deciding vote to make Sam Houston St. Clair the next President. Though they said it was expected to be close, every one of the pundits had thought Senator Thurston would win out over the governor of Florida, especially since the Democrats had such a big majority in the House of Representatives.

As it turned out—and this was all news to Kolsnar as well as the rest of America—in the case of a tie in the Electoral College, each state gets a single vote, not each congressman, and several swing states unaccountably went for St. Clair.

None of this mattered in the least bit to Kolsnar. He finished a second cup of coffee, paid, and left the diner, walking down Lexington till it dead-ended at Gramercy Park. Here he turned west. On the far corner he saw cops putting up barricades outside Calvary-St. George's Episcopal Church where John McTaggart's funeral would be held tomorrow morning.

A snide smirk crossed Kolsnar's lips as he thought about the mayor making a grand entrance the next day, a far cry from the whining, frightened little man he had been Christmas Eve when one of the robbers twirled him around holding him by the little bit of hair he had left growing at the base of his skull.

Kolsnar thought about the bonds again. He couldn't keep them out of his mind. He well knew that the minute the robbers tried to unload the bonds, one of his contacts would know about it within a few hours. And he would find out from them. He'd seen and talked with some of his contacts already, but there were still a few more to cover (the

shadier types—not the white collar types) before his net was thrown wide enough to be sure to catch the fish.

Then he would have to wait again.

And wait.

And wait.

And wait.

Until somebody somewhere made the first fatal move.

\* \* \*

Russell Tiller settled into the comfy leather chair behind his desk in the offices of the Russell, Meredith & Chloe Tiller Foundation. Though headquartered in New York, and funded by money collected from all over the world, most of the Foundation's work centered on activities that could only be carried out in Washington. In many ways, the Foundation acted as a lobbying firm, but tarted up with the imprimatur and royal seal of approval from an ex-President.

But none of this was on Tiller's mind at the moment. The stunning result of the election in the House was on his mind.

He'd come down to Washington right after the party at Bert Eglamore's to do as much arm-twisting as he could, or at least to pretend to do as much arm-twisting as he could, to sway members to vote for Thurston.

He'd even met with this upstart freshman Congressman Matt Hawkins, trying to convince him to hold steady, to honor the commitment he'd made months earlier to support Thurston to the very end. But Hawkins had become the talk of the town once it was discovered he was sleeping with Patricia Vaughan, wife of the gay Jonathan Vaughan who was Bert's (and St. Clair's) partner in the mining operation Bert had mentioned New Year's Eve.

By his loss, Thurston had created a void at the top of the Democratic Party, a void that would now be filled by his wife, who would position herself to run against St. Clair in four years. If she lost, Tiller knew

they were strong enough to ward off any other challenger who might want to run when St. Clair left office after two terms. So he felt very confident Meredith would get two chances to run for President.

But Tiller didn't think St. Clair would get two terms. He had "one-term President" written all over him. He was incredibly rich, with his own island in the middle of Miami's Biscayne Bay. He was as close to an aristocrat as an American could be. He had morals and a conscience. Not quite the kind of politician American voters were electing these days.

Add to all this that his election was brokered! Stolen. Hijacked.

Tiller, who knew a little about corruption and graft, had to admit his head was still spinning when he considered the rapid fire chain of events that unfolded yestersay.

Immediately after casting his vote for St. Clair, Hawkins resigned his seat in the House. He had been a congressman for about three hours.

He was then just as quickly appointed by the Wyoming governor to replace the senior senator from Wyoming, who had resigned from the Senate as soon as the vote confirming Dexter White as the new Vice President was taken. This was only a few hours after the new Senate had been sworn in.

Hawkins, a Democrat, casts the deciding vote to give the Presidency to St. Clair, a Republican. That alone smelled fishy. And then to be named a senator the very same day after resigning from the House?

Everybody in the country was crying, "*Fix!*"

The only question was—Who?

Who fixed the election?

Fingers were pointed in a hundred different directions, but Tiller's money was firmly on the incumbent President Jeffrey Norwalk. He didn't know how, but he knew Norwalk was behind the whole spectacular magic trick that made St. Clair the new President.

Tiller leaned back in his big leather chair and smiled. The whole operation had been carried off without a hitch. He had to admire Norwalk.

And, really, it was all right with Tiller that St. Clair was President.

He had every confidence that his wife would be the next one in four years.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 14

*January 5 – 10:15 A.M.*

It was a dismal, dreary, depressing, morbid, uncomfortable, sad, frightening, horrible, ugly, gruesome, and ... well, Freeman thought, awkward procession from the little church just north of Gramercy Park where John McTaggart's funeral was held to the graveyard out at Green Point, Queens, where he was to be buried.

The procession of cars with burning headlights was long—it was always like this when a cop got killed, Freeman mused, wondering at the same time if he would rate such an impressive send-off into the Hereafter. He probably would, he convinced himself—if he died in the line of duty (or, “doody,” as he liked to call it).

There were dignitaries aplenty at the church—from His Honor on down. *Everybody* in city politics and the department was there. They had to be for a cop's funeral. And everybody followed the hearse out to the graveyard.

So there was a God-awful long procession of cars—and Freeman was back in the guts of it somewhere in his unmarked God damn green Ford with Angie. Patricia was up front, naturally enough, and he wished he could be with her and the boys. He knew he could offer something to them that he couldn't offer Angie.

Angie was saying something unimportant to him. His mind was elsewhere, of course, but the tone of Angie's voice—the way she just suddenly stopped talking—obviously she wanted him to respond, just to make sure he was listening. He wanted to snap at her, but this was the day of his ex-partner's funeral. The least he could do was be polite to his wife, who had really liked John. He raced through his mind—thinking desperately for something innocuous to say.

“Sorry to see your parents go,” he managed.

"I was, too," she said. "But at least yours are going to stay with us a couple more weeks."

"That's nice," he said, hating himself for being bored with all this pointless bullshit. But he was bored nevertheless.

"Yes. It'll be nice to have somebody around."

"You telling me you miss me?" he asked defensively, suddenly a little more interested in the conversation. "This isn't like you."

"Oh, I know, Amos. Forget it."

"I'm working long hours on this case... I want John's killers."

He wanted that, yes, of course he wanted it. But what he also wanted was to be with his dead partner's wife.

That minute.

Forever.

"Don't make excuses for your work, Amos. Or John. You don't have to. I know how you must feel."

He knew she didn't know, couldn't know.

"That's the way I am, Angie."

"I know."

Big difference between Angie and Patricia, he reflected.

Angie accepted Freeman's idiosyncrasies, she put up with him. She was undemanding in a zillion ways. Patricia, on the other hand, was very demanding in just the ways that Angie wasn't.

He guessed it was a matter of caring. He really didn't give a damn about Angie. They'd grown apart so long ago. Work had been so much more exciting. Angie had a ho-hum personality, bored him to the point of yawning, and her conversation was tedious. Whenever Patricia said something, however, he was glued—listening attentively to every word.

Patricia was quick-witted.

Angie was dull.

Patricia was gorgeous.

Angie was ordinary.

Patricia had a mind.

Angie was vapid.

Patricia was exciting.

Angie was a bore.

And he?

He was a shit heel.

But, at the same time, he'd never felt more *alive* in his life. Never. And he wasn't about to let go of the moment, the thrilling sensation that ran through his blood at the mere *thought* of Patricia McTaggart, much less her touch. No, he wouldn't—couldn't—let *that* go.

He felt guilty—in a way—but not guilty enough to put Patricia out of his mind. He wouldn't do that. The truth, though, was that he couldn't if he wanted to. Patricia was all he could think about.

Patricia McTaggart had been proud of her past. She came from an old New York Scottish family named McLachlan and had married a McTaggart, also of an old New York family. One of John's forebearers had been attorney general of New York, and the family had a huge plot in an overcrowded cemetery in what was now the Borough of Queens (a couple of hundred years ago, Freeman thought, this area was woods and pastures). While the graveyard was full to overflowing now, and few people were buried in it these days, the McTaggarts had a plot that still could accommodate a few more generations.

The cars rolled solemnly through the front gate—the huge black hearse, the limos carrying the immediate family, the mayor's limousine, followed by the cars of the New York Police Department biggies and City Hall politicians, and the others—cops like Freeman who rallied round when a comrade got blown away and it was time to see him off before going hell-bent after his killers.

There had been no snow for days, it seemed, and the air was cold and dry as the mourners found a place to park and got out of their cars and walked down towards the plot enclosed by rusted wrought-iron. The cemetery undulated over several knolls, and the tombstones and grave markers seemed to roll as if on gentle ocean swells, like so

many empty silent ships heaving rhythmic sighs with every rise and fall. The Manhattan skyline was a visually stunning backdrop to the cemetery—a world filled with the nasty realities of life on the edge of a city of the dead, a city where no one cried and no one lived, no one loved and no one died, a city where everything was frozen. Where everything was over. Manhattan stood there—*vitally alive*—ominous, overwhelming, fantastic in the distance, like an Emerald City of tall dream-like buildings rising magically out of the barren earth where everything eventually would return. Freeman knew only too well how easily death mingled with life in that city. For a minute, it scared him, but just for a minute—because he knew it was real. And that was scarier.

People passed through the squeaking gate into the enclosure and formed a wide circle around the gravesite, quietly, quickly, according to rank. The family. The officials. The friends.

Some rank, thought Freeman.

The Presbyterian burial service did not take long, and then all the cops and city officials got together to tell one another (yet again, thought Freeman) how bad and heinous they thought this murder was, and how hard they were going to work to get the guys who did it. It was their duty, etc. (or doody, thought Freeman with a twisted frown as he overheard the bullshit). What willing hypocrites, he thought.

Freeman and Angie twisted, nudged and wheedled their way through the milling throng to the family. All Freeman could think was how super Patricia looked. (Repulsive thought, he knew, but that's what was in his mind). Patricia saw them at once and looked steadily at Freeman over Angie's shoulder as Angie gave her a sisterly hug.

*I'm as big a hypocrite as everybody else here*, he thought, hating himself.

He wondered how it could be possible to hate yourself for loving someone. But there it was.

"Is there *anything* we can do, Patricia?" Angie was saying.

"Nothing, thank you, Angie."

*“Anything at all?”*

“Thanks. But no.”

On such a cold day, and sad one, there was a good deal of warmth in Patricia’s eyes as she looked at him, Freeman thought, and he smiled slightly back at her. In fact, he was quite proud of the way she was bearing up.

“Are you ready, Patricia?”

“Just a minute, Mother.”

Patricia’s mother turned back to John’s mother. Freeman recognized the latter—he’d met her once over at the McTaggart house. A couple of other cops came over and Angie started talking to them—giving Freeman a chance to edge close to Patricia.

They hugged.

“Mother’s maid is watching the boys, and they won’t be back until tomorrow,” Patricia whispered. “I’ve told the families I want to be alone today and tonight, and they won’t argue. Can you come over?”

*Can I come over? Try to keep me away.*

“When?”

“An hour after all this?”

“Give me two.”

Then they were engulfed by others who wanted to offer condolences. Freeman edged his way out of the crowd and ran into the mayor’s party preparing to leave.

“Morning, Mr. Mayor,” Freeman offered, nodding.

“Hello, Freeman. Your first report is tomorrow, remember.”

Freeman saw Marlton—just behind the mayor—stiffen a bit.

“Yes, Your Honor. I remember.”

“See you then, Freeman.”

Freeman nodded as the mayor and the others passed by. Marlton lingered behind.

“By the way, Lieutenant,” Marlton said when they were alone, “what exactly *are* your observations on the investigation so far.”

“Since the investigation hasn’t gone too far, I don’t have much to report, Mr. Marlton.”

“I’d like to see you early tomorrow morning then, Lieutenant. Just to discuss a few matters of policy with you. I think it’s important we’re both on the same page, don’t you?”

“I meet with the mayor at noon.”

“Then shall we say, oh, at ten?”

Marlton smiled like a cool son of a bitch, Freeman thought.

“At ten. Yes, sir.”

“In my office.”

“Of course, sir.”

*I’d like to see the day he comes to my office*, thought Freeman as he watched the bastard slink off towards his limo.

He saw Rafaela Salguero walking in another direction and called after her. Rafaela turned and waited as Freeman jogged over.

“How ya doin’, Amos?”

“Oh, I could use a little drink. How about yourself, you dumb Cuban?”

Rafaela, Freeman knew, was really down over John’s murder. Now, however, she smiled.

“I guess I could use a little ol’ snort myself. And I’m only *half* Cuban. The good part is Salvadoran.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Don’t ever ask a Cuban or a Salvadoran that question. You’ll get your handsome head chopped off.”

There was a tiny pause, and neither said anything.

“This is the last funeral I come to—if it’s a cop’s,” Rafaela said.

“Seems like I’ve been to a hundred.”

“Me, too.”

“Pretty shitty.”

“Yeah.”

“I heard about the deal the mayor gave you. Quite a chance.”

“If that’s what a guy wants to make out of it, yeah, it’s a chance.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I know you didn’t.”

“Does this give you a better angle at cracking this, being the mayor’s liaison, I mean?”

“If I get a break. But the mayor didn’t make me his liaison to solve the crime—it was all about politics, him and Marlton and the rest of it.”

“Still, it puts you in a—”

“Good position, yeah.”

“Hmm,” mused Rafaela. “Well, there’s nothing from the lab side. The church was clean. Not much at all.”

“You combed it?”

Rafaela looked at him with that look a real professional gives you when you ask a dumb question.

“Yeah, with a fine-tooth comb, you stupid Gringo.”

He smiled.

“I love it when you talk dirty to me.”

“Let’s have that Cuban dinner we were talking about, okay, Mr. Hot Rod?”

He and Rafaela’d had a thing a few years back, long before Patrica entered the picture. Now they were just friends. That was another story, he told himself. She was still very hot, though.

“Yeah, when?”

“Tomorrow night. How’s that?”

“Fine.”

Another pause.

“Think you can crack this, Amos? Seriously?” Rafaela asked earnestly.

“Like I said, Rafa. If I get the break. Look, see you tomorrow for dinner. I’ll call ya.”

When they got home, Freeman told Angie he had to do some more work on the case. He got out of her green Ford and into his green Ford and within the specified two hours he was parked a block away from Patricia's apartment house.

Four minutes later, he was in her arms.

# Chapter 15

*January 7 – 10:05 A.M.*

“We haven’t really had a talk since the investigation got started, Lieutenant,” said Marlton. “There just hasn’t been the time.”

*No shit*, thought Freeman as he watched Marlton choose his words carefully, sitting behind his desk at headquarters alternately folding and unfolding his fingers, resting his elbows on the desk.

Freeman had come—as he was instructed—to Marlton’s office, and now he was sitting across from the deputy mayor trying to be as polite as he could, and yet smugly sure of himself and his mandate from Lindstadt—a freedom he knew Marlton would sooner or later try to muzzle.

*Sooner*, guessed Freeman, or he wouldn’t be here so quickly after the kickoff of the investigation.

“You’re in a unique position, Lieutenant,” Marlton said.

“I know, Mr. Marlton.”

Freeman smiled—teasingly, smugly, confidently.

Marlton reacted with a slight frown, obviously deliberating over every word.

“I am curious to know ... *if you know* ... why His Honor has placed you in such, uh, an unusual position?”

“No idea, Mr. Marlton.”

He wasn’t about to help the son of a bitch. He could squirm until Easter for all Freeman cared.

There was some small talk in which Marlton asked Freeman about his background, family, etc. Then Marlton moved on.

What exactly...” Marlton began. Freeman knew he was taking what he considered to be a plunge. “What exactly *are* your instructions from His Honor, uh...” Marlton glanced at his dossier on his desk “...Amos?”

“You don’t even know my name?”

“I know your name,” the turd smiled, spreading his arms wide. “I learned that in college—pretend you don’t know someone’s name so it puts you on the defensive.”

“Do I look like I’m on the defensive?”

“I know some of the guys down at the precinct call you Dirty Amos because you sometimes break the rules.”

“Well, sometimes.”

“Maybe a lot of times.”

“Maybe.”

“Well, they don’t call you *Dirty Amos* for nothing.”

“Well, they’re my friends. You can call me Lieutenant Freeman.”

Marlton sat back in his chair, and let out a heavy sigh.

“I’m not getting very far with you, am I?”

“My instructions are to report to the mayor on the progress of the investigation—*as I see it*.” He was merely quoting the mayor.

“It’s an odd assignment, is it not?”

Still fishing.

“Depends, I suppose.”

“On what, may I ask, Freeman?”

“Depends on how you look at it, sir. It’s an odd assignment for me, yes.”

“Any idea why he chose *you*?”

“Must be my honest face.” Freeman grinned broadly.

Marlton wasn’t grinning. He was still fishing, and he hadn’t even had a nibble.

“Then I can’t see what it is you’re supposed to do.”

Time for a nibble.

“Neither can I, Mr. Marlton.”

Marlton immediately looked relieved—even though he was trying his best (and his best was pretty good most of the time, Freeman saw), not to look relieved.

“Precisely, Freeman. I think you’ve hit the nail on the head, as they say.”

“Oh?”

Freeman loved to play dumb. (That bitch Rafaela Salguero told him he was born that way).

“Yes, you see, I don’t think His Honor knew exactly why he wanted you to do whatever it is he *thought* he wanted you to do. He doesn’t know. You don’t know. And, I confess, I don’t know know either. I think he just had the idea come into his head, liked it—for whatever reason, only God knows for certain—and has no idea what to expect of you. It’s possible, you know, Freeman, that you’ll look like a fool when you report to the mayor.”

“Oh, How’s that? I wouldn’t want to look like a fool, Mr. Marlton.”

“I know you don’t, Freeman,” Marlton said with a protective fatherly smile. “That’s why I think it important that we get together periodically to go over the investigation—so we reach a mutual understanding on how it’s proceeding.”

“When—and how often—do you think we ought to get together?” Freeman asked, knowing Marlton would say just prior to his meetings with the mayor.

“Why not just before you meet with the mayor—every Friday?”

“That sounds, oh, well orchestrated, Mr. Marlton.”

Marlton’s avuncular smile was gone.

“I’m not sure what you mean by your choice of words, Lieutenant.”

Freeman noticed Marlton’s switch from “Freeman” to the more formal “Lieutenant.”

“Choice of words, Mr. Marlton?” he answered with mock innocence.

“I’m not trying to *orchestrate* anything.”

“For a minute there, Mr. Marlton, it sounded suspiciously like you were trying to control the flow of information to the mayor.”

Marlton stood up at once, furious.

“That very suggestion could cost you your job, mister,” Marlton sneered.

Freeman tried to placate him.

“I’m an honest guy,” he lied. “I was just telling you the way it *sounded* to me. I’m not saying I believe it.”

It was too late. Marlton would never trust him after today.

But Marlton was going to try again, too. Freeman could tell by the look in his eyes.

“I’m just trying to *coordinate* the information the mayor receives, Lieutenant. After all, I’ll be reporting to him, too.”

“I understand that.”

“And I don’t see any need for conflicting reports. That’s all there is to this meeting. I’m just suggesting we get together to go over the facts to date—to get our act together. I may be deputy mayor, but I still have to go up before His Honor, just like you.”

*Just like me? Hab!* With the friends Marlton had in Albany and City Hall, Freeman could see why Lindstadt was wary of him. Slippery little bastard, this. Freeman couldn’t help himself. God meant for him to piss on this guy.

“I’d rather make my report and let you make yours, Mr. Marlton. Otherwise, the mayor would be getting two identical reports. Probably he will anyway, but maybe not.”

“You won’t cooperate, is that it?”

“Oh, I’ll cooperate, but I’ve got my shit together and I can handle myself if you don’t pull rank on me and get in my way.”

Freeman realized exactly what he was saying, but he thought he better push back now, at the beginning, rather than appease the little worm.

Marlton shook his head sadly.

“I could be a big help to you later on, Lieutenant.”

“Maybe.”

“There’s no ‘maybe’ about it. Listen, I don’t have to tell *you* how hard it is for a person to rise in an organization as, as... as...”

“Backward?” he supplied. “Retarded?”

“... as backward as the New York Police Department. For all the help I can give you, I can also be just as big a pain in the ass.”

“Maybe,” Freeman mumbled, angry and afraid at the same time. Maybe he was in too deep for his own good.

“Again, Lieutenant, there’s no ‘*maybe*’ about it. I’m warning you here and now not to cross me.”

“I’ll keep out of your way, Mr. Marlton. As long as you don’t get in mine.”

“You’re talking out of line, buddy—”

“I’m not your buddy, mister. I’m a cop, God damn it, and you’ll treat me like one,” shouted Freeman, leaning forward out of his chair.

Marlton leaned back. He couldn’t believe the insubordination.

“All right, *Lieutenant* Freeman,” he snarled the word *lieutenant*. “The mayor’s seen fit to set you up on a pedestal. Fine. Pedestals crack and fall, you know.”

Freeman looked with hard eyes at the deputy mayor.

“Yeah, I guess I always lived for the moment,” Freeman said with a cynical frown.

“We don’t like each other, do we, Freeman?” Marlton smiled, sitting down.

“I wouldn’t say we were peachy-keen on each other.”

“The least we can do, for both our sakes, is keep this conversation between ourselves.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Marlton leveled an index finger at Freeman’s mug.

“I’ll give you a friendly piece of advice, Freeman, and it’s the only advice I’m going to give you. Don’t try playing games with me. You’re not just a street cop in this investigation. A lot of people are involved in

it, not just you. And there are a lot of games being played. Don't try to make an end run around me. I know more tricks than you do."

"Maybe."

"You use the word '*maybe*' quite a bit. If you try to play with me, Lieutenant, you'd better be damn sure you know what you're doing."

Freeman got up and walked toward the door.

"Do you understand me, Freeman?" Marlton called after him.

Freeman turned around with a tired, twisted frown.

"Well, Mr. Marlton, I promise I won't tell the mayor how our meeting ended."

"What do you mean?"

"The part where I told you to go fuck yourself."

# Chapter 16

*January 7 – 12:10 P.M.*

Later, Freeman went uptown for his first meeting with Mayor Lindstadt in His Honor's private office at Gracie Mansion. Alex Conrad led him into the office and announced him.

"Thank you, Alex. That'll be all."

Conrad looked a trifle disappointed that he hadn't been allowed to sit in, but left them alone at once.

"How'd it go with Marlton?" was the first thing Lindstadt asked.

Freeman looked back with wide eyes.

"Marlton?"

"Ah. You're wondering how I know," laughed Lindstadt. "I've got a man close to Marlton—very close. I know almost everything he does, who he talks with, and often, exactly what is said."

"News travels fast."

"That it does, Amos. Or should I say, 'Dirty Amos'? But it's a two-way street. Marlton is pretty sure what goes on around me, too."

"How do you know?"

"He's got a man just as close to me. It's Alex Conrad on the other side of that door over there."

"And you put up with it?"

"Certainly. If I gave Alex the boot, Marlton would burn my man alive. It's a quiet understanding, that's all."

"I'll never understand politicians, Mr. Mayor."

"Don't even try, Freeman. Just be smart enough to stay as far away from them as you can manage."

"You've taken that chance away."

“Yes, because you’re more important to me as a watchdog. If you’re not smart enough to keep from getting scalded, that’s your problem, Freeman, not mine.”

“Thanks, Mr. Mayor. I appreciate your confidence in me.”

Lindstadt laughed again.

“Now tell me about your interview with Marlton.”

“He felt me out about controlling what was reported to you.”

“And your response?”

“Why don’t you tell me what I said, Mr. Mayor. For all you know, it might be more accurate than what I tell you.”

“I do claim to know most of what goes on, even in the ivory tower built around my office, Amos, but in this rare case, I’ll just have to take your word for truth.”

Freeman gave him all the background.

“It’s all true to Marlton’s form,” said Lindstadt.

“As for the investigation itself, nothing to report. When you have a monster like we have trying to get started, it takes a lot of time. I have a few ideas of my own, but nothing yet to move on.”

“Let’s keep it up, Amos. When this monster, as you put it, gets moving, we’ll start seeing some action. By the way, what is your candid opinion of Chief Fowler?”

“Excellent cop, Mr. Mayor, and he’ll do a good job. He’d do a better one if he didn’t have so much civilian dead weight above him. All of that stuff doubles the time it takes to do anything.”

“I understand how you and other cops feel, but it’s a political necessity to have Marlton and the others there. It involves things that have nothing to do with solving the crime, but are essential because of the system we have.”

“It’s hard to live with.”

“But we have to live with it, Amos. You let me worry about that end of things. I’m good at that. Meanwhile, you worry about catching us some killers.”

“Will do, Mr. Mayor.”

Freeman left the mayor’s office and went directly to the hospital where Randolph Gerard was in intensive care. He’d been there twice before to interview the man, but he was still unconscious and in most critical condition. As before, Ginny Gerard was there.

“It’s so good of you to come by again, Lieutenant,” she said when she saw him enter the room.

“How are you holding up, Mrs. Gerard?”

“Oh, as well as could be expected, Lieutenant.”

“Have you been home at all?”

“Oh, yes. Twice. And our son and daughter are always dropping by. That makes everything a little easier. But they’re young. They have lives to lead. I hate to impose on them.”

“Don’t worry about them, Mrs. Gerard. Worry about yourself.”

He sat down beside the lady—now *this* was a lady.

“There’s so little privacy here, Lieutenant.”

Ginny was about to collapse from exhaustion, he could tell.

“He’s better off here than anywhere else in the hospital, I’m sure, Mrs. Gerard.”

“I keep telling myself that. He’s unconscious anyway, so I don’t suppose it matters a great deal.” She smiled. “I’m sorry. I’m just a little tired.”

Freeman got up and found the chief nurse on the floor and asked her to pay special attention to Mrs. Gerard. The nurse said she would see to it. Freeman then checked with the cop on duty in the hall leading to the special ICU. There’d been no unauthorized persons seeking admittance to the unit. On Freeman’s suggestion, Fowler had stationed a man to guard Gerard twenty-four hours a day in the event one of the robbers or Charles Kolsnar, still at large, tried to eliminate an important witness. But there’d been no unusual activity, and no progress in Gerard’s condition since Freeman’s last visit. But at least Gerard had stabilized. His heart was okay, and the docs had done a number on

his gut, taking out Kolsnar's bullet, patching up the old man. It'd been touch and go there for a while as Gerard stabilized following surgery.

He'd wanted to send some flowers to Mrs. Gerard, but their million business and social friends had inundated the hospital with all kinds of expensive flowers—none of which the hospital would allow into the ICU. So instead Freeman had brought Mrs. Gerard a few books to read as she conducted her lonely vigil, asking her on his first visit what kind she liked.

After sorting out things with the nurse, he went back to her.

"I do so much appreciate the books you brought me, Lieutenant. They were a big help keeping me occupied."

He made a mental note as he sat beside her to bring some more next trip.

"I'm glad they were a help."

"It's funny, I've got thousands of books in the library at home, and I never thought to bring any over."

She was an attractive woman in her late fifties. Her hair—tinted a clean silver the night of the robbery—was now fallen and pulled back. She hadn't taken any time for the beauty salon, and the color of her hair was a tired steel gray. She had very little makeup on and the crow's feet around her eyes were like ravines. She was just plain tuckered out.

"Would you like to step out for a little while—get a cup of coffee? Anything?" he offered. It would do her good.

"That's kind of you, dear, but I'd really rather just sit here by Randy. Maybe later in the afternoon."

"Whatever you say, Mrs. Gerard, I'll come back."

"You know," she said, looking at her husband lying quietly in bed shrouded in white, "I never realized until all this happened how much the pompous old fart meant to me," she smiled. "It's almost as if God were testing me, testing my love for him."

"Times like this do test us—in many ways—Mrs. Gerard. I think you've been very courageous."

All Freeman could think of was what a shitty husband he'd been to Angie.

"You could look at it that way, Lieutenant, but I see it as the very least I could do for him. Oh, he wouldn't be so distraught about me as I am about him, and I used to think about that a lot—the little attentions he never gave me. But I don't mind being here with him, and if he ever recovers from this, I'll be glad I was put through it."

"I have to go, Mrs. Gerard," he said, getting up.

She looked up at Freeman and smiled. He couldn't resist leaning down and kissing her on the cheek.

"You're one hell of a woman, Mrs. Gerard."

"You know, Lieutenant, I think you're one hell of a cop. I've watched you—how tough you are with the other officers, but here with me, you've been as sweet as a pussy cat. You really seem to *care* about Randy. None of the others really seem to give a damn."

"Well, I'll tell you something, Mrs. Gerard, I *do* care." He smiled and wagged a finger at her. "But you can't tell anybody because it would ruin my image."

"Your secrets are safe with me," she said. Freeman walked toward the door.

"Pals forever?" he smiled, turning back to Ginny Gerard.

"Pals forever."

# Chapter 17

*January 9 – 11:18 A.M.*

A couple of days later, as Freeman went into Special Headquarters, he ran into the two ushers from Trinity Church, Sergeant Harris, and the couple that tried to get past the “usher” finished looking at the tape of the interview with Brian Anderson. Anderson was also there, and the small party was coming out of the screening room with Marlton, Fowler and a few aides and street cops.

Marlton thanked the witnesses and said officers would take their statements and continue interrogations. He appreciated their cooperation; yes, he knew how many times they’d gone over it, and thanked them again, but they had to go over the whole thing one more time.

*Et cetera*, thought Freeman.

Anderson saw Freeman and walked over to him with what Freeman thought he meant to be a sly smile.

“Hello, Lieutenant.”

“Hello, Anderson. How’s it going?”

“Okay, I guess, if I could ever get away from you cops. I must have told my story fifty times.”

“You heard the deputy mayor. It has to be gone over, sifted through, *one* more time. You’re an important witness.”

“This is my thirteenth ‘one more time,’ ” he smiled. Freeman smiled back. “You have a unique position with the investigation. Mind if I ask you a few questions later on?”

“There’s not much to tell, Anderson. I’m just the liaison between the investigation and the mayor.”

“It seems to me Marlton would be the man—unless the rumors of a rift between them are true.”

"I don't listen to rumors, Anderson. That's how I can honestly say I don't know anything about it. I'm a cop, not a politician."

"Just the same, I'd like to interview you. You've put me off a couple of times already."

"Okay, Anderson. You can interview me—*off* the record."

The reporter was visibly excited, his eyes popping.

"When?"

"Someday."

The cop assigned to Anderson took him away and left Freeman alone. Fowler was walking down a corridor with some of his people and Freeman did double time to catch up with them. Fatty Fowler caught sight of him.

"Hey, Freeman!"

"Yes, Chief?"

"We got a make on that usher. Name's James Simon. He did time in the state pen and we're going to see the file now. Wannacomalong?"

"Damn right, Chief," Freeman said.

The tape had proven to be a gift from God. They now had a make on one of the gang. There could be no finer starting point.

When they got to the special filing room set up for the investigation, the staff was making copies of Simon's prison file. Freeman bumped his way in front of somebody in order to get one of the first copies. As the copies were collated and handed out, Freeman heard Fatty Fowler bark out his initial orders to his top aides.

"I want a complete rundown on this Simon character. We'll start with his file, work out from there. Standard APB out on him right away, but make it 'Urgent.' I want to know all about anybody who's had anything to do with him for the past *five years*, and I mean *anybody*—from his milkman to his mistress. If we don't find anything solid by that point, we'll go back ten years, but we'll get a lead."

"Want me to get in touch with Mr. Marlton?" one of his aides asked.

Fowler suddenly had a pained expression on his face. He sighed.

“Yeah, I guess so. But he’ll want me to report personally. Give me another copy of that report. Call Marlton. Tell ’im I’m comin’”

Poor Fowler, thought Freeman. Saddled with Marlton. It must be a pain in the ass. He was glad he wasn’t tied down with too much shit like that. He decided if they ever made him a chief, he’d decline the promotion. (On second thought, it occurred to him that no one in his right mind would promote him to chief, so having to turn down the promotion was pretty much unlikely.)

Back in his own little cubbyhole of an office—a lot smaller than the one he had at the Twenty-eighth—he looked over what they had on James “Jimmy” Knox Simon.

He was thirty-four, and the physical description was no surprise because they had the WNBC tape to give them that. He didn’t have what you’d call the longest record Freeman had seen in his life: a couple of armed robbery jobs for which he was duly convicted, a few b-and-e’s for which he’d received minor sentences, the first couple suspended with probation. Nothing major at all. His last armed robbery got him packed off upstate, but that was about it. His psychological profile showed he wasn’t a crazy. He’d held all kinds of odd jobs in his twenties, and these, Freeman knew, were harder and harder to get as he added up convictions for minor crimes, which in turn made crime all the more a convenient and even expedient option. His parents and other family were listed, and this is where Fowler would have his men start digging—there and with his last place of employment (selling men’s clothes in a small second-rate department store in Long Island City). The last thing they had on him was the Long Island City thing—the one he’d obviously left to join the gang that robbed Trinity Church.

“Bag of shit,” mumbled Freeman as he closed the dossier. There was nothing in it to indicate Simon was other than a minor member of the gang (which is what Freeman expected). But still it was a beginning, and one which Fowler and everybody in the investigation needed to

give them their first scent of blood. It made sense, though, Simon being out in front of the church. The guy in charge would have been inside supervising, inside where the real action was. Simon was a throwaway. He wondered how the other gang members would respond to the knowledge that Jimmy Simon had been interviewed by a TV news crew. Freeman knew that if he'd been a member of the gang, he would not have felt sorry to see Simon hit by a bus. But, if you didn't happen to have a bus handy with which you might dispatch Simon, there were always plenty of guns around. No, Freeman thought, he wouldn't want to be standing in Simon's shoes. As he drummed his fingers on the Simon dossier, Freeman became more and more convinced this foreknowledge of how the gang might deal with Simon made it a dubious exercise following up on Simon at all. If they found him, he likely would be dead.

He nodded to himself and decided the best thing to do was wait until the street cops had done most of the leg-work, read their reports, and then move in to go over an area he thought needed extra coverage.

Anyway, he was having dinner with Rafaela Salguero tonight, and was late to meet her at Big Dot's Jungle Bar. He'd only agreed to have dinner with Rafa after Patricia told him she'd be with the boys at her mom's house tonight.

As Freeman got up to leave, Brian Anderson came swinging through his open door.

"Glad I caught you, Lieutenant. I don't want you slipping away again. I've missed you too many times already."

Freeman wasn't about to be hog-tied by a reporter.

"Can't talk now, Anderson. Got to run. Something important."

"Oh, come on, Lieutenant. What's your problem? Hate the press?" Anderson was honestly bitter and genuinely disappointed.

"That's just the way it is, Anderson. Sorry."

"You know, I'm not the only one you've put off. You haven't been interviewed by *any* reporter from any paper, station or network. I've been doing a little checking up on you. Now what gives?"

"I'm a cop, Anderson, like I told you, not a politician."

"Off the record."

"Some other time," Freeman said, brushing past him.

"*Lieutenant!*" Anderson called after him.

He turned and glared at him.

"Lissen, you son of a bitch, I'm shy! Understand? *Leave me alone!*"

Anderson pursed his lips and frowned.

\* \* \*

Freeman walked into the Jungle Bar an hour and a half later than he said he'd meet Salguero. The bar seemed darker than the night outside.

"Why don't you turn on a few lights in this cesspool, Big Dot? An honest working man could get mugged in here."

"Then you're safe, Freeman," Big Dot replied with a welcoming smile.

Salguero was at the other end of the bar sitting on the stool next to Freeman's. She was half way through her third bottle of Seagram's wine cooler. Freeman walked down the length of the room, glanced at her drink and frowned at the gorgeous assistant medical examiner as he took his seat.

"How do you drink that shit, Salguero?"

"What? Seagram's?"

"No. Wine coolers. Any wine cooler."

"I like it."

"You always were a lightweight," Freeman said as Big Dot placed his bottle of Jack Daniels in front of him. Freeman poured himself a double and knocked it back in two brief gulps, exhaling as soon as he swallowed.

"Maybe I should start drinking vodka like all the other guys," he said, half to himself.

"What are you two bums up to tonight?"

“Don’t ask, Big Dot. We can’t tell you. Top secret. We’re under special orders from the department,” Freeman said with a frisky wink.

“Yeah,” we’re going out to get some Cuban food,” Rafaela added, sipping her wine cooler. “God, but I love a cold wine cooler. *Freezing* cold.”

“Lightweight,” Freeman mumbled.

“I’m not big on rice ’n beans myself,” said Big Dot. “That shit gives me the farts.”

“And that must be some kinda gale force wind comin’ outta that big black ass of yours, Big Dot,” said Freeman.

“Din’t even know there *was* any Cuban food in Manhattan.”

“There’s a place Upper West Side, Calle Ocho, but it’s pretty touristy. Food’s mostly Puerto Rican, anyway. Most of what you get up here’s Spanish, not Cuban.”

“Whatever,” said Freeman. “Rice and beans, beans and rice. What’s the difference?”

“A big difference,” objected Rafaela. “I found a new place we’re goin’, little hole in the wall, cross town from here. They got *Ropa Vieja*.”

“Must not be much happening over in the shop,” Big Dot said.

“Didn’t you see the news conference today, Big Dot?” asked Rafaela.

“No. The TV broke and I had to send it out to get fixed up.”

“*That’s* a first for this dump!” Freeman yelled.

“Shoulda seen it,” Rafaela said. “Marlton announced to the world that the illustrious New York Police Department had identified one of the robbers of Trinity Church as one James Knox Simon.”

“Which was an example of really tough police work, let me tell you. All we had was his face on tape, for Christ’s sake,” Freeman said.

“Did you see it, Freeman?” Big Dot asked.

“*See it?* I was in it, dumbass. I get nabbed, ya see, just after I read the report, just leaving to come here, and it’s one of Marlton’s boys telling me Marlton just got the news from Fatty Fowler and he’s gonna hold a

news conference and wants me there. *Me!* I can't believe you didn't see me on TV."

"He was great!" said Rafaela, sucking down the rest of her wine cooler, tilting the bottle toward Big Dot to indicate she wanted another one.

"Jeez," said Big Dot, "wished I'd seen it."

"I was there. Somewhere in the back. But I was there. He said he wants me at all news conferences. Some pile of shit, I don't know."

"What a laugh. The whole God damn mess," said Rafaela.

"I know," Freeman concurred. "Old Fatty was livid, I tell you, *livid* with rage, when Marlton said he was calling a news conference. *That very minute*. Fowler didn't want to tip off the rest of the gang, but Marlton said that wasn't as important as letting the people of New York know that we were cracking this thing."

"Didn't do his chances in the next election any harm, either," said Big Dot.

"No, that it didn't," said Freeman.

"This thing is really getting big press, ya know?" said Rafaela.

"All over the country. I know. All the networks mention it every night, and around the clock on CNN, MSNBC, Fox, all the talk shows," said Big Dot.

"Even when there's nothing new to mention," said Freeman.

"And that means they're going to ride it until we get a break on it," said Rafaela.

"Think this Simon is the break?" wondered Big Dot.

"It's a start," said Freeman, "but it ain't the break *I'm* looking for."

"It's not going to be an easy thing, either. All these national news people are on this thing," said Rafaela.

"And with that kind of crowd around, a bad guy can hide for a long time." Freeman drank his third shot of Jack. "Let's go get those rice 'n beans, Rafa."

"Okay. Just a second." Rafaela chugged half a wine cooler.

“Lightweight,” Freeman mumbled.

“Are you puttin’ me down again, Freeman?” Rafaela laughed.

He leaned over with a smile and gave her a lingering kiss on the cheek that revealed there’d once been something between them.

“Without your help,” Freeman said with great dignity, “it wouldn’t be possible to put you down, my fair lady.”

“You’re a shit, Freeman,” said Rafaela.

“Ah,” Freeman said, pointing a finger at her for emphasis, “in addition to being a true member of that ignoble Order of Lightweights, you have absolutely no judge of character, and I have great pity for you, my dear.”

“Thank you, Mother Superior.”

\* \* \*

After dinner, Freeman thought about going home. He’d had a not-too-subtle offer from Rafa to come over to her studio in Murray Hill for an hour. Of course, Rafa wouldn’t know anything about Patricia, that in fact he loved Patricia. That he’d never sleep with Rafa again.

And he’d told Angie he’d be home at a reasonable hour, but he’d said that dozens of times and come home late.

Instead, he turned his car toward Patricia’s place down near NYU.

She lived on one of those beautiful tree-lined streets—the kind that out-of-towners always say they’d like to live on *if* they lived in New York. (Well, the people who already lived in New York would like to live there, too!) It was a brutally cold night—no wind, still no snow after many weeks, but tough and nasty air that was brittle, freezing, dry and harsh. He left his car a block or so away and walked down the lovely street. It wasn’t very welcoming this time of night and at this time of year. No leaves on the trees. A few lights on the street cast a half-hearted glow on the old pavement. A few cobblestones could be seen reflected in spots where the pavement of later generations had worn down to the original road.

He went into the little foyer, got buzzed in, and climbed to the second floor, walking down the corridor to her apartment.

The paper tag on the door still read: Apt. 2-C/McTaggart.

Which seemed incorrect to him, somehow, though he had no reason in mind as to why it should seem so. She was still, despite their affair, his dead partner's widow. He cringed a little inside, wondering if he wouldn't be a better person for turning around right now and walking back down the stairs, out of her life forever and completely.

But he knocked gently. The two boys were surely sleeping and he didn't want to wake them.

There was a pinprick of light in the middle of the door, the peephole. It went dark for a second as Patricia's body filled the space, and then the door opened.

She smiled at him and whispered, "Come in."

He walked through and slipped out of his coat and into her arms, burying his head in her chest for a moment of immediate physical relief and then raising his face and kissing her long and hard on the lips.

"How's everything?"

"All right. The boys are asleep."

"I thought they would be."

She kissed him again and said, "What's the matter? I can tell by the look on your face."

"Nothing."

"Liar."

They walked into the cozy living room, toasty warm, inviting, relaxing. Freeman took off his suit jacket and his shoes and sat down. She came and curled up beside him on the squishy sofa with the comfortable print design.

"Tell me," she urged softly.

He turned and looked at her.

"It's nothing."

"Nothing you want to talk about, you mean."

“Oh, all-right-already. I was feeling a little guilty.”

“About what? Patricia?”

“The whole shitty mess—nothing specific.”

“Having second thoughts.”

“No. I love you, Patricia. I’m not the kind of person who doubts these things—*when* they happen.”

He leaned over and kissed her deeply on the mouth. If ever he doubted himself, her caring eyes and warm body pressed against his made him forget. She was wearing cut-off blue jeans and a red T-shirt. He drew back slightly and looked at her. Patricia’s intriguing blue eyes watched him, scouring his eyes for a lead as to what he was thinking. He tried to clear his mind, but it was difficult. His hand was on her magnificently slender golden thighs, which he rubbed softly, back and forth, back and forth, slowly moving up her body until he caressed her face.

Before either of them knew it, they were in her bed making love: wildly, passionately clawing at each other in a frenzy of excitement and passion, forgetting that on the other side of the apartment her two sons were sleeping. When Freeman came in a long, agonizing, painfully wonderful climax, he felt spent, cleansed, emptied. As always, he wanted a cigarette, and almost instinctively reached over for the night stand, stopping short because Patricia didn’t like him to smoke. Instead, he cuddled up close to Patricia, resting his head on her breasts.

“Now will you talk to me, Amos?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, Patricia. I don’t know what’s the matter with me.”

“You’re too smart not to know more than that.”

“Just before I came over here, I called Angie and told her I was coming home. When I left this morning I told her, and then I called her tonight and told her again. And I *never* do things like that with Angie.”

“So what’s it mean? Do you want to stop seeing me?”

“No.”

“Then is it John?”

“No.”

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

“The investigation?”

“*Fuck* if I know, Patricia. Quit badgering me,” he said firmly, angrily. Although he still had his head on her breasts, he could feel an almost physical withdrawal. He rolled over on top of her.

“Don’t pull away from me like that.”

“I wasn’t pulling away.”

“Yes, you were—inside.”

“I’m sorry. I just don’t know what you want me to do.”

“I know. It’s me, not you. I’m making you feel like a piece of shit, and it’s me who’s the piece of shit.”

“Maybe neither one of us is a piece of shit, Amos. You’re strange tonight. Not like yourself.”

“That nails it down all right. It’s a combination of things, Patricia. The investigation, finding John’s killer, the mayor, Marlton, Jimmy Simon, Trinity Church, Charles Kolsnar, Randolph Gerard. Hell, even Mrs. Gerard. It’s all that stuff. It’s all running around in my head. And there’s you. I want to get closer to you, and nothing seems to be coming together anywhere else. *Fuck*. I just don’t know anymore.”

“You’re a complicated man, Amos Freeman. You’re such a together man, except sometimes here with me.”

“Different, am I?”

“In lots of ways.”

They were silent for a long time.

“I think I know what’s really bugging me,” Freeman finally said.

A bitter wind brushed an errant tree branch, making it scratch against the window incessantly. There was a little light seeping into the bedroom from the hallway and he could see her eyes—dark blue—looking over his face carefully, searching the lines in his brow,

watching the shape of his mouth, looking back into his own brown eyes.

“It is you, after all. I’m just *so* crazy about you, Patricia, and I want you all the time, not just from midnight to 3 A.M., and I want Speedy and little Pat, too, ’cause I don’t have any kids. Angie never wanted any, would never even discuss it. We were married for a couple of years before I decided to be a cop—and went into the Academy—I didn’t think I’d ever have kids. I want some. I want *these* boys. They’re such great kids, both of ’em. And I just don’t know what’s going to happen after I get John’s killer—and I’ll get ’em, so help me Satan. I feel a little bad about Angie ’cause I never wanted anybody the way I want you. So I feel like shit, but I’m not a lightweight and I’ll handle it. Angie won’t miss me, anyway. I won’t justify anything. I still like Angie. I liked her when I married her, but I never really loved her. Every time I come over here I figure I ought to be at work getting those bastards we’re looking for. It’s a pisser, the whole investigation. I’m starting to wonder why I never loved Angie, and that bothers me. The kind of stuff that never bothered me before is starting to bother me now, and I don’t like it one bit. And if I’m guilty, it’s bothering me because it never bothered me before when I’ve done worse things that should’ve bothered me. It’s funny—the neighbor across the street told me a couple of years ago Angie’s been fucking a waiter at a coffee shop out at LaGuardia where she works. You know what? I never confronted her with it. There was never a scene, no dramatics. I just let it go—hope they had a good time. By then my job took over everything in my life and it just didn’t seem to matter. I was like a shark—motion was everything. I read it or heard it once, somewhere—they have to swim through the water and they can’t stop or they die. And when you die, you stop swimming. Not that the shark is every going anywhere. It’s all in the *motion*. That was me. I was only determined to be a good cop and keep on swimming. Nothing mattered. Nothing did—till all this happened. Hey, we’re both better off without each other, anyway, her and me. But it’s my life and I’ve al-

ways lived it the way I wanted to, and from now on you're a part of it, okay?"

"Okay."

## Chapter 18

*January 11 – 12:05 A.M.*

It was late—just after midnight—when Charles Kolsnar emerged from the downtown side of the East Side subway line to keep his appointment with Siv Pearlman on Fulton Street. Kolsnar stayed away from taxis, using them only when absolutely necessary. Though he had every confidence in the quality of his disguises (he had several different ones by now), he was mindful of the alert out for him, so he confined his movements to trains and buses and walking.

As Kolsnar made his way towards the East River, he saw the first traces of falling snow. It hadn't snowed in weeks, and he was glad to see it—just for a change of pace. He glanced up at the sky. Thick milky clouds heavy with the white stuff were rolling in over New York. It looked like it might snow for days. Now it was coming down faster.

He thought ahead to Fulton Street—it would be dead this time of night. Why in God's name Siv had wanted to meet on Fulton Street after midnight? Why not some nice, warm coffee shop? What he'd told Kolsnar when they talked that afternoon was he had business in the area, and that it was as good a place as any to meet—out of the way, quiet, private.

*And fucking freezing cold!*

As he turned the corner onto Fulton Street, he pulled the brown wig off his head and stuck it quickly into one of the roomy pockets of his peacoat.

What little light there was reflected eerily off the East River onto the buildings that lined the street, dancing on them to some surrealistic choreography dreamed up by nature. In the night, the dark buildings assumed the characteristics of potential hiding places for ambushers—the same buildings that were called “quaint” in brochures and which once attracted tourists to the old fish market that used to fill

their ground floors. But there could be no threat so soon. Siv would want to hear what Charlie was offering.

In the distance he saw traffic streaming over the Brooklyn Bridge.

Now he could see Siv standing under a light by the river near the South Street Seaport Museum. There was no way he could mistake the man for anybody but Siv. Siv's body was too well defined in the blunt light from the street lamp under which he was standing: short, quite on the heavy side, a little hunch to the back, which on a small man like Siv became a predominant and even embarrassing feature. As he drew closer, he saw the old checkered hat Siv had worn for years. Siv turned to watch him come. Without his wig—or even a hat—the handsome Kolsnar was instantly recognizable, and Siv smiled.

It was an ugly smile. Ugly. Like everything else about Siv Pearlman. His face wore the continuous, tortured, forced, frozen smile of a reptile, and he had a weathered, unhealthy olive skin to match it. The countless lines and pock marks in his face obliterated all else. His eyebrows disappeared into the lines and pocked craters making you wonder how hair could grow on such a face. Kolsnar had always thought that a portion of Pearlman's skin blown up a few times would look like the surface of the moon from a few miles up.

"*Charlieeee*," Siv said in greeting, his voice a raspy, evil, dangerous sound unto itself, "Goodaseeya."

"Hello, Siv."

"It's been a while since we did business, Charlie. I'm glad you looked me up."

"You know as well as anyone in New York that I've seen the others."

"Yeah. Word's circulated," Siv nodded.

"Sorry not to get to you sooner, Siv, but I'm covering all the bases on this one."

"That's what I understand," said Siv in his low, dark, grating and emotionless voice.

"You were a little hard to find, as usual."

“But you found me, Charlie. You were always good at finding things.”

“Like I’m going to find my bonds.”

Siv said nothing, but raised his hand and stuck a cigar into his mouth. At first, Kolsnar was surprised by the movement of his hand—as if from nowhere—and thought he’d drawn it from the pocket of his dirty and smeared raincoat. But the coal at the end of the cigar was burning, and Kolsnar imagined Pearlman must have been holding it behind his back when he walked up. Kolsnar damned himself. He should have noticed the cigar’s absence at first. Everyone who dealt with Siv Pearlman knew he always had a stogie in his mouth. But he could as easily have been holding a gun behind his back.

“I wish ya luck, Charlie.”

“Had any word?”

“Not yet. Most of it’s been about *you*—both public word and private word.”

“No doubt. I’m a hot item.”

“How’s it feel?”

“Warm.”

“Your company’s offered a reward. Two hundred fifty g’s.”

“You wouldn’t try to collect, would you, Siv?”

“On an old friend?” Siv asked in a voice which came as close to offended horror as he could manage. “I just thought I’d mention it to ya. You’ve been to a lot of people about these bonds—some of them my competitors, and I just thought I’d remind you some of ’em aren’t as *fair* as me. You might find yourself facin’ a coupla New York’s finest waitin’ for you. Two hundred fifty grand is, after all, two hundred fifty grand.”

“I don’t walk into set-ups like that, Siv. You know me better than that. So do the others.”

“Mmm,” was all a doubtful Siv offered.

“If anybody’s heard anything about the bonds, it would be you. What about it, Siv?”

“I said it: most of what I’ve heard is about you.”

“‘Most’ of what you’ve heard,” Kolsnar said flatly.

“Yeah. Most.”

“What else?”

Siv Pearlman took the fat stogie from between his fat lips and smacked them together. He’d been looking across the street to the indistinguishable buildings opposite, his back to the river. Now he turned his ugly head towards Kolsnar. The front of his face became enclosed in shadows, while before Kolsnar had had a lighted view of his hideous profile.

“What about the terms?”

“I’m offering five.”

“Five percent? Not much.”

“There’s an incentive, of course.”

“*Yeah?*”

“I’ll kill the man who tries to steal them. As far as you or anybody else in the black market is concerned, those bonds belong to me. Nobody else. Any man who tries to cross me on this will have to face me—sooner or later. I’ve got the money and the cover to hold out a long time. I’ve always kept my word in the past on things like this, Siv, and you know I mean what I say.”

“Yeah, I know you mean what you say, Charlie, I’ve always known that. Anything else about the bonds? Any ... rules ... or anything else like that, conditions?”

“Yes. The man who gets first access to the bonds is to contact me. I’ll help him recover the bonds, or he can do it himself. Either way, he gets his five percent gross. If he tries to get hold of the bonds without telling me first, he’s crossing me, and I’ll kill him—no questions asked. Clear?”

“About as clear as anybody could ask.”

“Good. Now you say you haven’t heard anything?”

“Everything on these bonds is still public knowledge, Charlie. That’s the truth, plain and simple. The guy who’s got ‘em hasn’t made the first move yet.”

“And when he does—?”

“I’ll know about it.”

“That’s up-and-up.”

“Now, how do I get in touch with you, Charlie, in case I need to?”

“I’ll have to contact you.” Kolsnar smiled. “You *do* understand my position, don’t you, Siv?”

“Sure. Been in the same shoes myself a few times.” Siv smiled in return, staring amusedly at Kolsnar, chomping on the stogie as the snow began to fall furiously, twisting it around in a long circle in his mouth without touching it, an habitual practice with him.

He withdrew his hand from his pocket and handed Kolsnar a piece of paper. Kolsnar glanced at it in the dim night light.

“I didn’t think you would trust me, Charlie. That’s a private number. I was expecting you to get hold of me and set it up special—just for you.”

“I’m sure you have a few numbers like this, Siv.”

“Think what you like, Charlie. You call that number any hour you want, day or night. It’s only got voice mail on the other end. It’ll say one word. Either ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ If the tape says ‘No,’ you’ll know I got nothin’ on the bonds. If the tape says ‘Yes,’ you’ll know to meet me here, on this spot, at midnight the day you call. I’ll make the change from ‘No’ to ‘Yes’ at noon on the day I know something.”

“As always, Siv, you’re well prepared.”

“In my business you have to be —I guess I oughta say *our* business now that you jumped to the other side. Don’t ever get caught with your pants down, Charlie. You’ll be too scared to pee.”

“Thanks for the free advice.”

“Question.”

“What?”

“Why’d you leave me till last? My feelin’s was gettin’ hurt.”

“I purposely saved you till last. The cops have been through my files at work. There’s a lot of stuff in those files.”

“A lot of *names*, you mean.”

“That’s right. But there are a couple of names—like yours—that were too important, too crucial, to put in writing. So if the cops get to the others, I’ll at least have been to them first. I was hoping to get a lead from them—*if* they had anything—before the cops could track ‘em down.”

“That all makes sense. They won’t track me down, not the cops.”

“What else do I need to know?”

“I won’t cheat you, Charlie.”

“Am I supposed to believe that?”

“No. I just thought I’d throw it out there for what it’s worth. I’ll take five percent and be satisfied. I’ll play middleman any day.”

“It can be a tricky game.”

“Not if you know all the rules.”

“And if nobody makes up their own.”

“I won’t, Charlie. You can count on me.”

“I’m happy to hear that, Siv.”

“I kinda had a feeling you would, Charlie.”

“That takes care of our business, then.”

“You never did waste time.”

“I don’t have the time to waste.”

“Good night, Charlie.”

“I’ll give you a call every day.”

“You do that, Charlie.”

# Chapter 19

*January 13 – 8:05 A.M.*

It seemed every time Amos Freeman woke up, he had a new grudge against the world. This morning felt no different.

Opening his eyes, he saw Angie sitting with her back propped up against the headboard looking at him with obvious disdain and contempt.

*Oh, shit*, he thought, *if she says anything I'll bite her frigging head off.* He'd slept only a few hours, having been with Patricia until very late. Angie was about to start in.

*God, not now*, he thought. *She couldn't.*

"Amos?"

*She could!*

*"Amooooooooos?"* she repeated.

He didn't want to answer.

"What?" he said anyway.

"You've been seeing somebody, haven't you?"

He looked at her through bleary eyes, tired with sleeplessness.

"Why in God's name do you say that?"

"You called me twice to say you'd be home at a decent hour, but you ended up coming in at a quarter past five."

*God, she has ears like a bat!*

"So I called you. So what?" He might be sleepy, but he could always muster up the wits to lie.

Angie sighed and got out of bed, going into the bathroom to wash up.

"I'm going down to make some coffee," she said over the rush of water in the sink.

Freeman half crawled, half rolled, agonizingly, out of bed, landing miraculously on his feet, and stood up.

“Listen, Angie,” he said, following her into the bathroom.

She had been leaning over the sink. Now she stood up and looked at him.

“When you called last night, it sounded like you were trying to tell me something without really saying it.”

“That’s crazy, Angie. I called, that’s all. I figured I’d get home early ... spend a little time with the folks, ya know?”

Her affirmative nod was brimming with skepticism and she left the bathroom. He looked after her and shrugged to himself. There was only so much a guy could do. He ducked into the shower, anticipating the ferocious stream of water that would fall over him. He twisted the faucet, and cold water sprayed down onto his head. Slowly it warmed up, then got hot. He adjusted the “cold” faucet and evened out the temperature of the water. It took every bit of energy to scrub himself, but he managed a fairly decent job of it. He washed thoroughly between his legs, rinsing away the crusty cum left from last night, even as he remembered everything so pleasantly. He caught himself smiling—and felt guilty for a moment.

He felt like an asshole. There was Patricia, so warm and appealing, and there was Angie, his wife.

He came out of the shower and quickly pulled on some clothes. Then he scurried downstairs to the kitchen.

The smell of fresh perked coffee titillated his nostrils as he touched the landing, passing by the plaques, department medals and framed citations Angie had insisted on hanging up. Angie was leaning against the kitchen counter sipping the hot brew. He pulled a mug out of the cupboard and poured himself some coffee, sipped it and went to the refrigerator.

“Amos,” she started.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” he said, taking eggs and bacon from the fridge and brushing past her to the frying pan.

“Amos,” she said again.

Half a pound of bacon slices hit the frying pan with a sharp sizzle as he turned to her.

“*What?*” he demanded.

She was speechless.

“Nothing,” she replied.

He had her cornered.

“*Well, what?*”

“Nothing, that’s what,” she answered forcefully.

“Nothing? If you’ve got a gripe, let’s get into it and get it over with.”

He heard the parents coming down the stairs. She looked over his shoulder, hearing them, too.

“I haven’t got time to think about it,” she said, “and the folks are coming down, so let’s forget it. I don’t want them involved in this.”

She went to take over at the frying pan as he turned around to greet the parents as they came into the kitchen.

### *January 13 – 11:45 A.M.*

Chloe Tiller narrowed her eyes as she listened on the phone in her office at the Tiller Foundation.

“I don’t care what she told you. Change the schedule. I’m going to Mexico City on the 25th and that’s that.”

Chloe slammed the phone down and got up, leaving her lavishly appointed corner office overlooking Union Square and going across the hall into the office of her Chief of Staff, Melissa Goodwin.

Melissa’s assistant, Joann Ridley, saw Chloe coming, along with a dark cloud of anger that creased her brow, and knew better than to say Melissa was in a meeting and didn’t want to be interrupted. So Joann just watched as Chloe stormed through the outer office and barged through the door without knocking.

Joann leaned around her desk and saw Melissa sitting at her desk talking to one of the Foundation staff.

“Just what do you think you’re doing telling the travel office that I’m not going to Mexico on the 25th?”

Melissa was completely taken aback by the confrontation, though Joann noted there was no special look of surprise on her face. More a look of, “Uh-oh, here we go again.”

“Your father said you might not go down till the 27th, so I just thought I’d tell them to—”

“You’re not here to think, Missy. I’ll do the thinking around here. You’re here to do what you’re God damn well told to do, understand?”

“Of course, Chloe, of course.”

“All right, then.”

Chloe did an about face and marched out of Melissa’s office, her lips pressed together as she seethed in rage. She caught Joann’s eye as she entered the outer office and stopped, stared at Joann for what seemed like Joann to be three or four very long seconds, turned around and walked back to the shellshocked Melissa.

“Let me rewind a little bit, Missy,” she said in a nasty tone. “Get your shit together and get out of this building. You’re fired.”

Chloe turned around and came out of the office, pointing her finger at Joann.

“You’re my new chief of staff, Joann, OK? Call security and have that bitch in there escorted out of the building. She’s got 30 minutes to get her stuff in a box and out of this place.”

Not waiting for any response, Chloe turned on her heels and left the office with a satisfied smile on her face.

Joann got up and peered into Melissa’s office.

By now Melissa was standing with her mouth open, as was John, the guy she’d been meeting with. Melissa threw down the pencil she’d been holding.

“What was that all about?” asked John.

“Hell if I know. At least I’m finished with that fucking bitch. John, go get me a couple of boxes. Joann, give me that shopping bag you came in with this morning.”

“I can’t believe what she just did,” said Joann.

“I’d had it with her anyway. I never met a woman who acted like she had her period every day of every month! Damn!” said Melissa.

Joann brought the shopping bag and helped Melissa get her things together.

“Do you really think you have to pack up?” asked Joann. “Maybe she’ll cool down.”

“Even if she does, I’m sick and tired of her and her almighty ego. You be careful, Joann, you’ll be next.”

Joann didn’t bother to call security. Melissa was packed up and out in less than 30 minutes.

Forty-five minutes later, Chloe waited for her driver to come around to open the door of her town car before she got out onto 55th Street just off Fifth Avenue and walked into Michael’s, a fashionable luncheon spot favored by media types.

Inside, she nodded to the maître d’, who extended his arm into the main dining room.

“Your father is already seated, Ms. Tiller.”

Chloe smiled and nodded, but didn’t say anything. She passed a couple of Secret Service agents standing by the bar and made her way to the far corner of the room to her dad’s preferred table. He always took a seat with his back to the wall, looking out into the room. Everybody could see him from that angle.

He was chatting with the foursome at the table next to him when she walked up.

“Oops, gotta go! My daughter’s here,” he laughed. “And she’s all business.”

The four men nodded in her direction as they all laughed and returned to their lunch.

She sat down next to Russ (not across the table) so they could talk more intimately. A waiter appeared and poured out San Pellegrino for her.

When he left, Tiller leaned in, his manner more serious.

“What’s this about you firing Melissa?”

Chloe clucked and shook her head.

“The woman is incompetent, Daddy, a regular asshole.”

Tiller leaned back and frowned.

“That’s the second chief of staff you’ve had in less than a year, Chloe. You’ve got to get a handle on your staff if you’re going to be taking on more and more responsibilities.”

“I’m working on it, Daddy, I really am,” she smiled.

She knew that he always melted when she smiled at him.

Chloe had come aboard the Foundation two years ago, when she was 31, with the assumption that her father couldn’t and shouldn’t head the organization by himself. With Chloe’s mother all but definitely planning to run against St. Clair in four years, she wouldn’t be able to shoulder much of the management duties a Foundation as large as theirs required. That’s why two years ago they changed the name to the Russ, Meredith and Chloe Tiller Foundation, to pave the way for Chloe to become more involved, and also to allow for Meredith to take a more active role if she lost her Presidential bid.

Though Russ wanted to discuss Chloe’s management style in more depth (knowing that she had a lot to learn if she was serious about developing into an effective leader), he put it off when he saw Bertram Eglamore come through the front door and follow the maître d’ over to their table.

Tiller got up and shook hands with him.

“Bert, great to see you.”

“As always, Mr. President.”

Eglamore leaned down and gave Chloe a peck on the cheek and then sat down. A waiter hovered.

"I'll have a whisky, just two cubes of ice. Make that Buchanan's, thanks."

"Yes, sir," said the waiter.

"And how's the lovely Helen?" asked Tiller.

"She's fine, thanks for asking."

After a few pleasantries, they ordered: a green salad for Tiller (he was pretty much a vegan since his bypass operation), the seared scallops for Chloe and a Cobb salad for Eglamore.

"I supposed you'll be going down to Washington for the Inauguration," said Eglamore.

"Yes, but not until the 19th."

"If Thurston had won, I'd be going, too," said Eglamore.

Tiller gestured to the waiter.

"Another scotch for the gentleman," said Tiller.

After the waiter turned away, Eglamore got down to business.

"I've spoken to Ibn twice about the endowment package and more frequently with the top man on his British staff, Reginald Loomis, who you know well, but that Chloe hasn't met."

Tiller nodded.

"I know of him," Chloe threw in.

"The Foundation will be on much more stable ground if we can get Ibn to make this contribution," Tiller said.

"It's been very sweet of you to work with us on this, Bert," said Chloe, reaching out and touching him on the arm and offering him the same innocent smile she used on her father.

"Oh, it's the least I can do. Nobody does as much for so many people around the world as the Tiller Foundation. Nobody."

Both Tillers responded to the compliment by smiling humbly.

"Thank you, Bert. That's very kind of you. We do our best. Are we still talking about the same level of commitment we discussed at your New Year's Eve party?"

“Yes, Mr. President. Ibn is prepared to donate \$50 million to the endowment,” Eglamore shrugged casually, “and I don’t see why he won’t add another \$50 million or even more in the years ahead.”

Inside, Chloe was jumping for joy. If they could get Prince Ibn Abdul Rahman to commit to \$50 million, they would be well on their way toward achieving their goal of raking in \$400 million to establish the Foundation’s endowment.

The problem with Tiller’s management of the Foundation centered on his failure to focus on building the endowment. The dozens and dozens of speeches he made around the world (netting him \$250,000 to \$500,000 each) had brought in untold millions of dollars, yes, but the money went to support his lavish lifestyle and wildly expensive travel costs, as well as the Foundation, so every other year or so the Foundation ran up debt into the millions. They had over 300 employees around the world and the costs to maintain this infrastructure were enormous.

Meredith had been the one to point this out a couple of years ago when she decided it would behoove the family to groom Chloe to take over the reins of the Foundation and to work toward beefing up the endowment.

“After all,” she’d said at the dinner where they discussed this, “your dad’s had bypass surgery and still has some ongoing health issues, and if he dies before the Foundation is stabilized financially, it won’t go on.”

What Meredith hadn’t said but what everybody knew was that it had been and currently was Russ’s combination of charm, charisma and pushy strong-arm tactics that powered the Money Machine that fueled the Foundation. Without him, the money would dry up and the Foundation would be history.

Neither Meredith nor Chloe were fools enough to think they had the same level of prestige and charm to replace an ex-President like Russell Tiller.

There simply was no one remotely like him. The guy could generate hundreds of millions of dollars because he wasn't afraid to ask for it.

Chloe planned to spend the rest of her life running the Foundation, but she knew there wouldn't be a Foundation to run if they didn't get the endowment issue settled.

Sheikh Ibn Abdul Rahman was a Saudi royal prince with large land holdings in London as well as New York. Eglamore had become friendly with him when he ran his hedge fund in London. When Eglamore moved to New York and became an active contributor to various Tiller political campaigns, Ibn had expressed an interest in meeting the ex-President. Eglamore had set it up when Tiller was in London to make one his speeches. It wasn't long before Ibn began making annual donations to the Tiller Foundation. The amounts varied from year-to-year, from \$5 million to \$10 million.

It had been Chloe's idea to go after this big fish to see if they couldn't get him to make a big splash by contributing a large amount not to offset the Foundation's current expenses, but specifically the endowment. They had worked through Eglamore to make this happen.

"Since you're coming down with me and Helen to Lyford Cay, and he's going to be there, I think we can conclude the matter over drinks and dinner in the Bahamas."

Tiller reached over and touched Eglamore on the arm.

"Thanks to you, Bert, we're on our way. Couldn't have begun this process so well without you."

"It's my pleasure, Mr. President," said Eglamore with a thin smile.

What Eglamore did not share with the Tillers was what Ibn and Loomis were looking for in return for such a generous donation.

*Loomis can tell them that himself*, he thought as the waiter delivered his Cobb salad.

## Chapter 20

*January 15 – 2:10 P.M.*

Back in his office at headquarters, safe from domestic conflagrations, Freeman sat down and flipped open Charles Blanding Kolsnar's dossier for the dozenth time, scanning facts he'd read many times before: born in Cleveland thirty-five years ago, high school there, college at the University of Michigan majoring in business, no military service, first job a minor position in a bank, married Loretta Stewart, second job a better position in a bank in Pittsburgh, daughter born, third job a bond buyer in Wall Street (where he first got interested in bonds in a big way, guessed Freeman), fourth job as third assistant to the chief of the Bond Security Division of prestigious Gerard, Nugent & Co., fifth job as second assistant to the chief, sixth job first assistant, seventh job chief.

*He rose fast, this Kolsnar, a real comer,* thought Freeman. Maybe there was nowhere to go from chief of BSD—no way to get onto the board of directors. Or maybe he just got tired of it all. His dossier didn't make him out as an interesting embezzler. He was singled out only by the bizarre circumstances leading to his loss of the stolen bonds in the church. *And*, of course, he was a murderer. But no prior police record. Sure, he was known to those cops who dealt in the black market, known quite well. A good many men had been assigned the job of interviewing these guys who'd known Kolsnar, and Chief Fowler had pulled several of these people into the investigation with the hope that they might be able to track Kolsnar through his contacts. Both the detectives in question and Kolsnar had the same stomping grounds, shared some of the same snitches, probably. There might be a way of tracking something down. *If* he hadn't left the country. A man of Kolsnar's experience and contacts could easily slip out of the country.

*But had he?*

It was a question that tormented Freeman. They were searching for a needle in a haystack with a better than even chance that they'd come up with only hay and cow shit. After much thinking about Kolsnar, Freeman concluded that it was possible they were looking in the wrong haystack.

*Possible.*

Freeman had talked personally with some of the cops who dealt in high-level white-collar crime. Some of them even knew Kolsnar. Their opinion was that he'd slipped away, probably to South America. Easier "to get lost there than anywhere and still be able to go to the movies and eat in nice restaurants," one of them had said.

In addition, they all agreed Kolsnar was a brilliant operative in the dark and often dangerous world of the black market. He had a good record of recoveries, much higher than the average New York City cop engaged in the same area of expertise. (Which explained why he was working for Gerard, Nugent & Co. and they were only underpaid cops, Freeman reasoned.) They said Kolsnar was cautious, but not too cautious, daring when the odds were right, brilliantly daring sometimes. He was in excellent physical shape, a member of the New York Athletic Club (courtesy of Randolph Gerard's good offices, Freeman had discovered after a little research) and he went to the club almost every day to work out. He was inventive, quick-witted and had a lot of street savvy, a strange double-leveled personality that allowed him to move with ease in the underworld and at the same time glide gracefully through high corporate circles and good society that he'd gained entrée to by marrying socialite Loretta Stewart.

This was no common crook, Freeman knew.

But Freeman knew he was no common copper, either. He smiled to himself as he looked at Kolsnar's file photo in his dossier from the personnel office of Gerard, Nugent, trying to penetrate through the barrier the photograph presented.

Freeman thought long and hard about the cops he'd questioned (and the reports of other bond detectives who'd been questioned). He was aware that the average cop did not do his job as well as it could be done if he thought he was chasing rainbows.

All of this boiled down to a residual hunch: Freeman thought Kolsnar was still in town on the make for his bonds. He did not sound like the up-and-run-away type the other cops said he probably was. They were making the Big Mistake of ascribing to the criminal the actions *they* themselves would have taken had they found themselves in the same situation. The whole key to good detective work, he knew from years of experience, was to put yourself in *their* place.

*Probably.*

*Maybe.*

Freeman hated those words. Too many question marks with those words. But rather than go with his colleagues on the force, he'd go with the question marks.

Freeman's eyes drifted to another manila folder on his desk—Jimmy Simon's dossier, rapidly getting fatter as dozens of detectives scoured his past, interviewing his family, friends, etc. Though Simon had been identified, there wasn't enough legwork done for Freeman to get into it himself. *Let the street boys write the tiresome reports*, Freeman thought cheerily. *I'll read 'em later.*

No. Simon could wait a bit.

Kolsnar was on Freeman's front burner.

Freeman pulled himself, tired, out of his chair. He was still a trifle worn down by the gymnastics with Patricia two nights before. He smiled, thinking of her. He sat back down and gave her a call. No answer. The boys were back in school now that New Year's was over, and she was probably out—

*"Hello!"* Patricia said suddenly, breathlessly.

"Hi. I thought you were out."

"No," she said, catching her breath, "I was ... in the bathroom."

“Bathroom.”

“Sure. Girls have to do it, too,” she said.

Freeman blinked.

“I know,” he said, as if to say, *What do you think I am, a fucking idiot?*

He could picture her smile, the curve of her lips, her eyes.

“Well, I just thought I’d call to say hello.”

“I’m going to go for a walk.”

“Where?”

“Oh, out to Washington Square. It’s snowing buckets and I love it.”

“When it’s fresh.”

“Don’t be so sour, Amos. I love you.”

*Don’t be so sour, I love you*, he repeated in his mind. God, but he was lucky to have her.

“I love ya back, Patricia.”

“Coming by tonight?”

“Yeah, if I have time.”

“Amos?”

“Yeah?”

“Come early. Spend a little time with the boys. They…”

“They miss their dad is what you were going to say.”

“I’m sorry. It’s not your burden, Amos.”

“Listen, I love the boys, too. And it’s *not* a burden. I’ll get by before they go to bed.”

“Thanks, babe.”

“I’m only doing it so I can get laid again.”

*Asshole!*”

They both laughed and rang off.

Freeman pulled himself up again, but wasn’t as tired as he’d been before talking to Patricia. Pepped him up, she did.

He drove downtown through the heavy snow, past Trinity Church where Kolsnar had shot Randolph Gerard in the stomach and John McTaggart in the head, turned left into Wall Street and drove halfway down to Gerard, Nugent & Co. and parked in front. Hopping out, he looked up at the sky—an upside down narrow river of gray flowing murkily between the tops of the tall buildings. Snow fell heavily to the street in huge confetti-sized flakes. This might go on a week or more, he mused.

“Sorry, sir, you can’t park there.”

He looked down. A security guard from Gerard, Nugent was standing in front of him. He frowned, thought of his unmarked car, pulled out his wallet, flipped it open.

“I wish I was here to go over my portfolio, but I’m afraid it’s official business.”

“Oh,” said the security guard, knocked down a few notches.

Freeman passed through the confidence-inspiring glass-and-bronze doors to the spot where Kolsnar had gunned down the two guards, probably hoping for overtime pay by working Christmas Eve, checked in with security, and went to the elevator bank and punched 7.

On the seventh floor, he went to Parker S. Cunningham’s office. Cunningham was first assistant to the chief of BSD, now acting chief in the wake of Kolsnar’s hastily self-inflicted retirement.

Cunningham received him cordially, as he had three times previously, and with that same too-careful nervousness and caution that businessmen did when they’d met a detective. By now, at his age, this was a joke to Freeman. Cunningham was thirty-one years old, blond hair—the kind of looks that made you certain he played a lot of tennis or lacrosse when he was in college, drank a lot, had lots of women—the whole devil-may-care bit. But underneath he was a pussy. Milquetoast.

Freeman had been through the files, given the names of Kolsnar’s snitches to HQ (the ones Kolsnar had written up in reports, at

least—no telling how many others there were), but now he wanted to do a little digging into personalities.

“Tell me something, Mr. Cunningham.”

“Certainly, Lieutenant.”

“Who hired you as Kolsnar’s assistant?”

A puzzled frown took shape on Cunningham’s normally clean, smooth and untroubled brow.

“An odd question, Lieutenant.”

“Still, it’s a question,” Freeman smiled. “My supply is running low.”

“Well, it was Mr. Kolsnar, actually. Oh, I knew—or rather, my mother knew—Mrs. Gerard. That got me into the company. They didn’t really know what to do with me, so they put me on the bottom of Kolsnar’s staff. He was the one who got me promoted.”

“And more than once.”

“Yes, that’s true. More than once.”

“Why did he move you up?”

“He told me once,” Cunningham said, his eyebrows coming together in reflection. “He said I was a good administrator, which, if I don’t mind saying so myself—” he began to say, a smile curving his lips.

“Yes, go on,” Freeman interrupted. *Build your ego on your own time.*

“... and wanted me to handle all the routine administrative duties. Eventually, I was taking care of everything. He was always much more interested in the field work. He dealt with the agents on staff, parceled out the cases, knew each case in and out. Traveled a lot. That sort of thing interested him. He was bored by desk work. Mr. Gerard always said the worst thing about Charlie being chief of the BSD was we’d lost our best field man. Mr. Kolsnar had the fighting skills of a Navy SEAL.”

“So you really like the paperwork?”

Cunningham smiled.

“And I’m good at it, too, I’d like to add.”

Freeman looked from Kolsnar’s file photo up to Cunningham.

“You know, there’s a slight resemblance between you and Kolsnar.”

"You're not the first one to notice that. My blond hair throws people off. You're looking at a picture of Charlie, so you can see it much easier than the average guy."

"Yeah, his hair is pitch black."

"So when we're side by side you really don't notice it that much."

"Tell me more about Kolsnar's field work?"

"We've been over this to some extent, Lieutenant," Cunningham said, glancing furtively at his watch.

"We've got all the time in the world, Mr. Cunningham. And 'to some extent' isn't enough."

"Yes, of course," Cunningham replied, accepting the rebuke. "Well, yes, he did like field work. Usually the bigger cases. The one we discussed was the Arizona case in which he recovered the stolen bonds we were looking for. He and two other agents were working on it, plus a few investigators down in Phoenix. The bonds were recovered just before Christmas and, well, you know the rest."

"But there were others."

"The bigger ones, yes. He'd get on a plane and go wherever the action was. Almost as if he didn't want to leave that sort of thing behind. When he was third assistant, he did a lot agent work, or so I understand."

"He's only thirty-five. You're thirty-one. This division seems to be pretty young."

"It's a tough division, Lieutenant. It needs tough men."

*Then where do you fit in?* he wanted to ask.

Just then the intercom buzzed.

"Excuse me," Cunningham said, looking for approval. Freeman nodded his permission. Times like this he loved being a cop.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Anstruther would like to speak with you on line one," Freeman heard a secretary say. He knew that Anstruther was senior vice president, right under Gerard. Cunningham punched a button.

“Park Cunningham.” He listened, looked at Freeman. “Really? Excellent news, Mr. Anstruther. Yes,” he said, glancing at Freeman. “He’s right here. Yes. I’ll tell him. Thank you, sir.” He rang off. “Mr. Gerard has just regained consciousness. Mr. Anstruther just got the news, as well as a call from your office. Apparently you left a message.”

Amos was already checking his cell phone. He had about ten text messages and several more in his voice mail.

“Yes. With Mrs. Gerard to call me the moment he came to. I’m going over right away.” Freeman stood up and turned for the door.

“Mind if I tag along?” Cunningham ventured.

Freeman turned around and looked at him.

“Yes.”

And left, wondering how any mother could name a son Parker.

# Chapter 21

*January 15 – 3:25 P.M.*

When he got to the hospital, Freeman went right up to Gerard's room. He'd been moved from ICU into a private room. Here they allowed flowers, and Ginny had brightened the room as much as she could.

Four doctors, Gerard's son, daughter, son-in-law, Mrs. Gerard and the Reverend Emory Parkhurst were all in the room. Ginny turned to him when he entered.

"*Oh, Lieutenant!*" she exclaimed. "How *good* of you to come so soon." Ginny introduced him around, and when he got to Parkhurst, the two shook hands cordially.

Freeman still had in mind the troubles Parkhurst was going through, though they had no real bearing on the case. Janie Parkhurst's name and picture were on the front pages of the newspapers day after day, as well as the rumored political struggles within Trinity and the Diocese to depose the rector.

Ginny took him over to the bedside.

"Randy, this is Lieutenant Amos Freeman. He's come to see you many times."

"I'm not very strong, Lieutenant, but when I'm feeling just a little better, I'll be happy to answer your questions. Ginny's told me how often you've come by, and I'd like to thank you for that. I appreciate the attention and care you've shown her. She's told me all about it in the past hour."

"It was no trouble, Mr. Gerard. I feel pretty close to your wife by now. *And* to you. I've talked to just about everybody at the firm and I feel I know you rather well."

"Then we'll have some catching up to do," Gerard smiled.

"There is one question I've just got to ask, though."

The doctors cleared their collective throats and one of them said, “Mr. Gerard will have to rest at least twenty-four hours before any questions, Lieutenant.”

“This one doesn’t have to do with the case.”

“I’ll be happy to help,” Gerard said. “Never mind the doctors.”

Though in pain, the old man had a lot of fire and fight in him.

“All right. Here goes. I’ve practically been living over at your firm. I feel I know everything about it. I know who you are and I know what the company is. But who the hell is *Nugent*?”

Gerard looked at him for about two seconds. Then his shoulders rose as he began to shake with convulsive laughter. The whole room broke out laughing.

Finally, Gerard was able to say, “*He died ten years ago!*”

Freeman nodded, continuing to play the straight part.

“Thanks, Mr. Gerard,” he smiled. “I’ll check back tomorrow when you’re feeling better.”

As he left, she gave Ginny a kiss on the cheek.

\* \* \*

Back in his car, Freeman drove all the way uptown to Madison Avenue and 64th Street and parked his car a few doors down from Le Jardin de Fleurs, one of the fanciest joints on the Upper East Side catering to the “ladies who lunch.”

The snow continued to fall—sometimes heavy, sometimes not so heavy—but it never stopped.

Freeman hunched his topcoat higher over his shoulders as he made his way into the upscale eatery, suitably impressed with all the mirrors framed in gold, the gold leaf moldings and lushly upholstered chairs.

A maître d’ in a tux greeted him, but he nodded to the table where he saw sister Helen sitting with Loretta Kolsnar.

“I see my party, thanks.”

He swept passed the maître d’ and went over to the table in a far quiet corner, the kind of table Freeman had told Helen to book.

Helen performed the introductions and Freeman got right down to business.

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate you seeing me, Mrs. Kolsnar.”

“I don’t possibly know what I can tell you I haven’t already told the other officers who interviewed me, Mr. Freeman, but since you’re Helen’s brother...”

“I understand.” He gave his sister a wink.

Loretta had a distant look in her eye as the waiter approached and recited the specials of the day.

“The Dover sole is always good,” Loretta said in a completely disinterested monotone, her gaze faraway.

“The Dover sole it is,” said Freeman as he handed the waiter his menu. “And a Jack Daniels on the rocks.”

“Amos, you shouldn’t drink while you’re on duty,” Helen chided.

“It’s my lunch hour.”

This elicited a wan smile from Loretta.

“Well, then, what the hell?” said Loretta. “I’ll have a glass of Chardonnay.”

Helen shrugged, almost relieved.

“Oh, damn it. Me, too.”

“What is it you want to know, Mr. Freeman? As I’ve told the other officers—”

“I’ve read all their reports, Mrs. Kolsnar. I know you had no inclination that your husband intended to steal the bonds, that he’d behaved in a completely normal way in the weeks leading up to Christmas Eve. I just wanted your opinion, given that you’re married to the man, what you think he intended to do *after* he got away with the bonds.”

Bewildered, Loretta shook her head.

"I have no idea what he intended to do. We didn't need the money. I come from a fairly wealthy family. He had a great job at Gerard, Nugent, paying him quite a bit. He seemed to love his work. I have no idea what led him to do this."

"We know he had the company jet waiting for him at Teterboro Airport just across the river. The flight plan called for a nonstop flight to Mexico City. So obviously he intended to leave the country that night. Since his plans were changed when he lost the bonds and he had to go into hiding, I want to ask you, knowing him as you do, do you think he'd lie low to try to recover the bonds or try to slip out of the country and disappear?"

"I'm sure Charlie had a detailed plan on what he was going to do," she began. "He was extremely thorough in everything he did."

"Would he have abandoned you and your daughter?" Freeman asked, waiting until the waiter left after dropping off his drink and their glasses of Chardonnay.

"And fled the country?" she asked. She paused a moment to consider. "What you're really asking without saying it is did we have the kind of empty marriage that meant so little to him that he'd leave us without even saying goodbye and disappear forever?"

Freeman took a sip of the burning whisky.

"I didn't want to put it like that, but that's exactly what I'm asking."

Loretta chewed a little on her lower lip, took a sip of wine, glanced at Helen, who had a concerned and sympathetic frown on her brow.

"Yes, Charlie was capable of that, of leaving us without a word. I know he loved all the traveling he did for the firm, the excitement of it all. He was always up when he got back from a tough assignment abroad. Always hyper. He was gone quite a lot. In many ways, we led completely separate lives. When he was gone, I didn't really miss him. I certainly don't flatter myself that he missed me."

Helen reached over and petted Loretta's hand.

"Oh, Loretta..."

“You’ve seen pictures of Charlie, Mr. Freeman. Anyone can see how handsome he is. He often said I only married him because he looked so good in black tie.” A little laugh came from her throat. “And he *did* look awfully good in a tux.”

Freeman didn’t want the whole scene to turn maudlin, so he pressed on.

“Let’s say there were two choices, Mrs. Kolsnar. Charlie either slips out of the country to avoid capture. Or he stays behind, goes underground and tries to recover the bonds on the black market that he knows so well. Which path would he choose? Just based on your own instincts, what do you think?”

Loretta took another sip of wine.

“I can easily see him staying behind. He never opted for the easy path just because it was easy. Charlie has no fear of anything that I’ve ever seen.”

The ladies’ salads arrived along with Freeman’s Dover sole.

Freeman watched as Helen dug into her salad and Loretta listlessly pushed leaves of Romaine around her plate for a few minutes before putting down her fork.

She looked at Freeman.

“This must be what it feels like when they tell you you’ve got cancer. The hour before your life was going along great. Not a care in the world. Maybe you had an ache or a pain here and there, but for the most part you felt fine. Now you’ve got cancer. You don’t cry. You don’t weep. You don’t even feel sad. You just feel like your life has changed and you were the last one to find out about it. The man sleeping in your bed was not the man you thought he was. He never was. Every day that you lived with him, you never knew what was going on. Not the truth. Your life was a dream. And the doctor comes in and gives you a wake-up call. You’re just in a daze.”

Freeman was going to ask her if she thought, once Kolsnar got wherever it was he had planned to go, that he'd ever send for her and the kids.

But he didn't ask her. He felt like he knew Charlie well enough by now to know the answer to that one.

## Chapter 22

*January 16 – 11:02 A.M.*

Freeman came into the office the next morning feeling unusually chipper, and extremely relieved that Helen had picked up the tab at Le Jardin de Fleurs. Oh, sure, he'd reached for his wallet, fully intending to pay (thinking to save money by skipping Big Dot's a couple of times this week), but when Helen shoo-shooed him and lifted the check, he didn't fight her. She could afford a hundred lunches like that every week, thanks to Bertram Eglamore. He definitely felt he had a firmer grasp on Charlie's character, so for him the lunch was well worth the time and trouble. He owed Helen a Big One.

Angie hadn't been inquisitive this morning, and he'd gone to Patricia's early last night to spend some time with her and the boys. They sat around the house for a while and later went out for a huge pizza dinner in a restaurant a few blocks from the apartment. Patricia had bundled up the boys and they walked the distance through the still freshly falling snow. He'd had a *beer* with his pizza. Well, two (*ugh!*) beers, and the kids drank Cokes. They all had a good time. Then they walked back, hot sausage, mushrooms, tomato paste and cheese in their bellies, put the boys to bed, tucked them in, and he and Patricia made love for a couple of hours before he went home.

He came into his office after grabbing a cup of coffee from the break room down the hall, sat down at his desk with a smile on his face and snatched up the top piece of paper in his "in" box crammed with reports:

### INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: All Section Heads  
FROM: Chief Inspector Joseph Fowler  
CASE: (Special) Operation Trinity;

No. 497284

RE: Press Conference/Scheduling

The Mayor decided last night that he would hold a major press conference for the purpose of assuring the people of New York that progress is being made on the ongoing investigation of the Trinity Church matter. The news conference has been scheduled for 11 A.M. this date and will be held in the Briefing Room here at Special Headquarters. All Section Heads are instructed to attend same by special order of the First Deputy Mayor.

End.

That meant him, too. He ranked in Operation Trinity as a full "Head of Section." As the mayor's liaison, and since that was his only official function, they hadn't known where to place him in the pecking order of the huge staff assembled for the investigation. They couldn't very well put him under the Public Information Section. So Fowler made him a Staff Section. He was officially styled: Head of Section/Mayoral Liaison. Of course, he was the full staff complement of his section, too, which made the whole matter a silly bowl of nuts, in his own meager opinion.

So he would have to go to the news conference. It was a direct order. He didn't see the need to attend. All you did was stand around trying to look tough so the morons looking at you on the tube would think you had the iron and the smarts to protect them from Rising Crime.

Duh.

Today was Friday, and he'd been planning to run up to Gracie Mansion for his noon meeting with Lindstadt. He thought for a minute,

then picked up the phone and put through a call to City Hall. He was passed on to Alex Conrad.

“Yes, Lieutenant,” said Conrad when he came on the line, “I’ve been meaning to call you, but I’ve been so busy setting up this news conference.”

“I guess my meeting with His Honor is canceled.”

“Yes. That’s what he wanted me to tell you. In fact, he’s already left for your headquarters.”

“Okay—just thought I’d check.”

“Sure thing.”

That was that. He was free for the day, then, after the press conference.

He swiveled his chair around, got up and went to the window to have a look out at the faceless back side of a building across the alley, musing about Charlie Kolsnar, wondering if he was still in New York. It was still snowing furiously, but there was little wind.

Freeman picked up the phone and called the section head in charge of the Kolsnar branch of Operation Trinity. He wanted to check to see if there’d been any developments along the lines of Kolsnar’s contacts in the black market. They knew some of the snitches and dealers Kolsnar was used to doing business with from the files in his office, and Freeman was desperately hoping one of the snitches would give them a lead to Kolsnar. He got through, but the conversation was short.

Because there was nothing new to report.

Freeman glanced at his watch. He might just as well stroll over to Rafaela’s office to see what she was up to.

The phone rang.

“Freeman here.”

“Lieutenant Freeman?”

“That’s right.”

“This is Arnold Brainard from the *New York Times*. I’d like to interview you about your part in Operation Trinity. Could we make an appoint—”

“Sorry,” Freeman interrupted, “but I don’t give interviews. Anything I could say or shed on this thing is available through the Office of Public Information.”

“But, Lieutenant, my editor was thinking of a human interest type story.”

“Sorry, but no thanks.”

“But—”

Freeman hung up on him.

There had already been dozens of articles about Operation Trinity—mostly front page—in the *Times*, the *Daily News*, and the *Post* couldn’t quite frankly get enough of it. And there’d been a huge piece in the *Times Magazine* on Sunday. A media war was developing among the papers, radio, TV, the networks, for breaks in this story, and they were looking everywhere, scrounging for leads the same as the cops. Freeman wanted no part of the press. He admitted his point of view was narrow-minded, but he thought of reporters in the same unflattering terms as he did his lawyers, accountants and doctors (*including dentists*)—and none was to be trusted for a fucking second.

The phone rang again. He snapped it up, ready to tear whoever it was a new asshole.

“Park Cunningham here, Lieutenant.”

“Right. You have something for me?”

“I do.”

Cunningham went on to tell Freeman that he’d just discovered Kolsnar had the company jet waiting for him on the tarmac at Teterboro Airport across the Hudson on Christmas Eve.

“And of course, he never showed up.”

“Correct,” said Cunningham.

“Where was he bound?”

“Mexico City.”

After getting other details from Cunningham, Freeman hung up and thought about everything. Kolsnar had planned to skip out to Mexico without so much as a Fare Thee Well to his wife and daughter.

Freeman knew already that Mexico City had not been Kolsnar’s final destination. It was just a convenient foreign city from where he could travel anywhere in the world without a trace. Cash went further in Mexico to cover your tracks than in a lot of other countries.

Now the question was: did he continue with his plans to leave the country using some other means? Or was he still here in New York biding his time?

Now there wasn’t time to see Rafaela and make the press conference—Rafaela would be there anyway—so he wandered slowly out of his office and made his way to the briefing room.

When he got there, he was surprised to see so *many* big shots in attendance. This was the first time Lindstadt himself was to preside at an Operation Trinity press briefing, and all the brass were out in force: Deputy Mayor Marlton, Commissioner Haffey, Chief Fowler, all their aides and plenty of the lesser stars in the department who wanted their ugly mugs on TV.

The media people were literally crammed into the smallish briefing room. Cameras were set up on tripods in the rear of the room, pointing toward the platform. A cluster of cameramen with handhelds, as well as a bunch of sound men with their long stick-like mikes, were pushing towards the front, their cameras and mikes looking like ugly mini-monsters bobbing and ducking, about to run amok. The still-shot guys were craning, yelling at each other while the men from the papers, pads aplenty in hand, complained loudly that they couldn’t see anything.

Freeman saw Operation Trinity’s hierarchy forming up on the platform, with the mayor and upper-echelon guys up front, the section heads standing behind them in a long line against the wall. What a bunch, thought Freeman, secretly annoyed that he was one of them

and about to join what looked like a line-up against that back wall and blackboard.

He gently mounted the three steps to the platform, receiving a welcoming nod from the mayor, and took his place at the far end of the line of section heads.

The mayor approached the lectern and raised a hand to quiet the multitude. Freeman imagined Lindstadt saying, *"Silence among the people! The Pharaoh's troops shall not harm thee! Follow me! This way to the Red Sea!"*

But all he managed was a slightly more banal, "Ladies and gentlemen ... may I have your attention, please?" which was decidedly less attention grabbing, in Freeman's humble opinion. Anyway, the roar slowly subsided; eyes and ears waited for the mayor to continue.

"I have a brief statement to read that sums up the activities of the staff of Operation Trinity to date," Lindstadt said, then glanced at a piece of paper in his hands: "The staff of Operation Trinity, in cooperation with the New York Police Department, and other law enforcement agencies of the State of New York as well as various Federal agencies, is continuing its thorough investigation of the events surrounding the robbery of Trinity Church on..."

The statement went on to recap what had happened so far. After finishing it, Lindstadt looked up and said, "Deputy Mayor Marlton and the senior staff of Operation Trinity have informed me that they have succeeded in collecting a great deal of information on James Knox Simon—the man identified earlier as the member of the gang who posed as an usher that night..."

Lindstadt stepped aside after a few more unimportant remarks and let Marlton have his say. The stuff about Simon was only window-dressing. They had really done no more on Simon than they would've done on anybody who'd robbed a 7-11. Of course, thought Freeman cynically, the importance of the crime made routine details like Simon's back-

ground work *seem* important to Lindstadt. This news conference was a total waste of time.

Marlton was running on at the mouth about how the local citizenry should get in touch with the authorities if they had ever had any contact with Simon...

Etc.

Haffey then took the stand to get in his two-bits worth on what a fine job he thought the staff was doing, etc. Chief Fowler stood right behind them, his hands folded together over his belly and in front of his crotch. He didn't like a news conference any more than Freeman did, and Freeman pitied him his deep involvement with the damned bureaucracy.

After the crock was full of meaningless dung, Mayor Lindstadt said they would field questions from the press. Everybody wanted to ask something, and dozens of arms were raised. Freeman thought of a schoolroom and a bunch of brown-nosing kids. He spotted Brian Anderson from WNBC jerking up his hand about half-way back in the room. Freeman frowned. That Anderson had been a royal pain in the ass, always calling him for interviews which Freeman wasn't about to grant, and generally proving to be a total asshole.

Finally, Lindstadt recognized Anderson.

"Yes, Brian," Lindstadt said, pointing to the newsman.

Anderson stood up and straightened his tie.

*What a wimp*, thought Freeman, shaking his head ever so slightly; he hated it when politicians coddled news people, always calling them by their first names.

"Mr. Mayor, I wonder if you could shed some light on Detective Lieutenant Amos Freeman's role in Operation Trinity?"

Lindstadt glanced over his right shoulder and looked at Freeman standing at the end of the line of section heads. Freeman returned the mayor's glance with as much total surprise and shock at the question.

He raised his eyebrows and offered up a slight shrug of ignorance. Lindstadt looked back to Anderson.

“I don’t know what you’re referring to, Brian. Lieutenant Freeman’s duties are public record. He’s listed on the staff roster as Head of Section/Mayoral Liaison, I believe.”

“I know that, Mr. Mayor ... but what does the Lieutenant *do*?”

Lindstadt shrugged, as if all this were obvious.

“He acts as liaison between the investigation and my office, keeping me apprised of various details. I don’t really see the point you’re trying to make.”

Freeman was hot and bubbling with anger beneath the calm exterior he was displaying for the media people and the others on the platform—every one of whom was looking his way. He caught the subtle shift of the cameras in his direction, knowing they were zooming in for close-ups, hoping at the same time the footage would be cut later on, deemed insignificant. He began to understand how Jimmy Simon felt that night at Trinity Church. He felt the sweat beading on his forehead, and there was a prickly sweat under his arms.

“But does Lieutenant Freeman have any staff working for him. He *is* Head of Section.”

Lindstadt didn’t know the answer. It was so unimportant. He looked to his left. Fowler shook his head *No*.

“No, Lieutenant Freeman doesn’t have subordinate staff. I don’t really see, Brian, exactly what you’re asking—”

Anderson cut him off politely.

“Mr. Mayor, I think the lieutenant is Operation Trinity’s Clark Kent in disguise.”

“I don’t see what you mean,” Lindstadt replied. “I do think we’re probably taking too much time—”

“I’ve checked into Lieutenant Freeman’s service record, Mr. Mayor, and I think it’s an interesting point to note that he has the fourth high-

est percentage of solutions—for cases worked on—of anybody in the entire Homicide Division.”

Lindstadt raised his eyebrows, impressed.

So did Freeman. Hell, *he* didn't even know that.

Lindstadt was trying to move on.

“Then I'm sure we are all happy to have Lieutenant Freeman involved in this investigation. But again, I don't really see the pertinence of—”

“In addition to that, Mr. Mayor, isn't it true that Lieutenant Freeman's former partner, the person he trained to be a cop, John McTaggart, was murdered at the scene that night?”

“Well, yes—that's true—but—”

“The lieutenant, then, has more than a passing interest in finding the people who committed these crimes.”

“Brian, I was there *myself* that night, as were *you*. *We all* have more than a *passing interest*, as you put it, in seeing these criminals apprehended and brought to justice. There's absolutely no further significance to Lieutenant Freeman's status on the staff of Operation Trinity.”

Lindstadt talked on a few minutes more and deftly worked around Anderson, who was trying to ask more about Freeman, by getting a question from somebody else.

When the ordeal of the press conference was over, Freeman stood just where he was while the mayor, Marlton, Haffey, Fowler and other senior department guys gathered around him as the lights droned down.

“What do you know about Anderson's interest in you, Freeman?” Haffey asked.

“Nothing, sir.”

“What's he interested in you for?” Marlton followed with.

“Beats me, Mr. Marlton. I was as shocked as the rest of you by his questions. I never knew what my *percentages* were. He's probably lying, anyway.”

"No, he's not lying," said Fowler. "Your record's right up there, Freeman."

"That part doesn't matter, anyway," commented Haffey.

"What contact have you had with Anderson before today?" Lindstadt asked.

"None. He's been after me for interviews and information, but I've always referred him to the P.R. people."

"Let's drop the matter now," said Lindstadt. "I don't want undue attention while we're in public."

With that, they all dispersed. Freeman made his way off the platform in turn and sought out Anderson in the lobby. When he spotted him, Freeman squeezed up behind him and grabbed him by the arm.

"What the *flying fuck* d'you think you're up to, Anderson?"

Anderson smiled that confident smile news people get when they figure they're on to something hot.

"Just trying to get information, Lieutenant."

"What kind of information?" said Freeman, making a controlled effort to keep him voice down. "I haven't got anything to *tell* you."

"I just think there might be a story in you. I have a hunch you're the key to this investigation."

"That's a pile of horse shit, Anderson, and you know it. There're over two hundred people working on this thing now. What makes me so fucking *important*?"

"I don't know. Just a hunch."

"Anything I might do, you could have fucked up just now. Anybody could see that tape on TV."

"True."

"If I had any cover, *any advantage*, you've just blown it!"

"I didn't look at it that way, Lieutenant. Sorry."

"*Sorry*?" Freeman almost gagged. "What the fuck good is *sorry*?" Anderson sighed.

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant. You’ve got your job and I’ve got mine. That’s the only way I see it. If you track something down, I’m planning to be there to get the story.”

Freeman leveled a menacing finger at the reporter.

“You stay out of my way, Anderson, I’m *warning* you.”

“I’ve got a story to cover, Lieutenant. Get *that* into your thick head!”

Anderson was holding his own against Freeman’s tough-guy tactics.

“I *warned* you. Get in my way and I’ll roll right over you, buddy.”

Freeman wanted to smack him right across his smarmy little face.

“I’ll take my chances.”

Freeman turned and walked away.

## Chapter 23

*January 16 – 11:46 A.M.*

That afternoon, Charlie Kolsnar, wearing jeans, his wig, work shoes and a peacoat, walked the few blocks from his hotel to the Chase branch bank on the corner of Columbus Avenue.

He thought of Harry and the other man he killed as he passed wordlessly by the security guard, who touched his right index finger respectfully to his cap and smiled as he opened the inside door for Kolsnar. He walked directly to the safety deposit vault check-in desk. A sullen, bored blonde sauntered up to the counter, chewing away on a piece of gum with a monotonous intensity that did not make you want to become a bank clerk in the safety deposit box section.

“Name?” she asked indifferently.

“Carl Bridges,” Kolsnar replied just as indifferently.

“Sign here,” the woman said, sliding a card across the counter to his fingers.

He signed, and the blonde tapped away on her keyboard. She found his file, and Kolsnar watched as she compared the card he had signed with the signature card on file.

He couldn’t imagine anything going wrong. He’d set it up too carefully.

“Signature don’t match,” she said. “Not even close. Wanna try again?” she looked at her nails as she chewed away.

It had been two years since he set up this box. His armpits felt wet under the heavy peacoat, which he had not unbuttoned since coming into the bank.

“Sure, I’ll sign again. You know how it is,” he smiled wanly.

He signed again. She looked at it. “Better,” she said. “Got any I.D.?”

He pulled out his wallet and put Carl Bridges’s driver’s license in front of her. She looked at the signature on it.

“Yeah, that’s good enough.” Without even looking at him, she said, “This way.”

*She’s probably wondering what she’ll do this weekend,* Kolsnar mused as he followed her into the vault area, down three steps, through a set of open bars and into the vault itself. He walked behind her up to his box and they went through the ritual of inserting their respective keys. She turned them both simultaneously, opened the door and pulled out a long narrow box.

“Wanna use the room?” she said sleepily.

“Yes.”

“This way.”

He followed her into a little cubbyhole where she noisily dropped the box on a metal table and closed the door behind her as she left, gnawing away at her gum.

Kolsnar sat down. There was a pair of long scissors attached to the wall with a rusty chain next to him on the table. He looked at it ruefully. It was used to clip coupons off bonds, the old fashioned way. He opened his box and looked at the Smith & Wesson .38 Special inside and thought of his own bonds.

He removed the S&W and dug into the small stack of papers in the box: drivers’ licenses, Social Security cards, passports, insurance identification cards, credit cards, etc.

When he was in Trinity Church, he’d taken his Carl Bridges driver’s license and the safety deposit key from his wallet and put them in his shoe because he noticed the robbers weren’t bothering to make people remove their shoes. But besides Carl Bridges, he could at will become Gene Neff or Tom Schneeberger or Conrad Wood or Lee Brittan.

In addition to the S&W, he had two Saturday Night Specials with no serial numbers stashed here. He took one of these, the S&W and all the identification for Conrad Wood—complete with photos of himself in the guise of that person—and put them into the pocket of his pea-

coat. Then he took \$5,000 from his pocket and put it into the box. If he ever had to leave the country and return again, he still had \$5,000 to get him started.

On his way back to the hotel, he picked up the items necessary to help him make the transition from Carl Bridges to Conrad Wood.

Kolsnar had read the papers and seen the TV newscasts of the press conference revealing the importance of Lieutenant Amos Freeman to what the cops were calling Operation Trinity. He also knew—from press reports—about the slow recovery of Randolph Gerard, and could easily imagine that the police had a growing dossier on him by now.

The papers also said that the investigation into Kolsnar's theft of the bonds was being considered a part of Operation Trinity for the time being, which meant to Kolsnar that instead of a single unit on his tail, he had the entire staff of Operation Trinity to evade.

And—thanks to Brian Anderson for bringing it out—Amos Freeman in particular.

Even given the hyperbole with which newsmen habitually spice their reports, Lieutenant Freeman was an unusual pea in a pod by himself. And a dangerous one at that: one who had to be avoided at all costs—or eliminated. Anderson was probably right about Freeman's extraordinary track record in solving homicides—that was probably the single fact that made him stand out in Anderson's eye. That, plus the fact that Freeman was officially considered a "liaison" between the investigation and the mayor's office. Which could mean anything the cops wanted it to mean.

To Kolsnar, it meant Freeman had no reins to hold him back. Freeman could skirt the quagmire into which a large-scale New York police investigation usually could be expected to sink.

In his room, Kolsnar put away the S&W, the Saturday Night Special and the papers identifying him as Carl Bridges. He'd bought a heavy metal lock box that he kept under lots of soiled clothes in the

closet. So obvious no one would look there. He kept everything important in it. He changed his wig and clothing and became Conrad Wood.

He then went out and rented a car for the day, using a credit card in Wood's name. When the clerk called to get the charge authorization, everything cleared perfectly. Kolsnar smiled. When he did things himself, he did them right. No screwing around with details.

In the car, he pulled a slip of paper out of his pocket and read the address of the special headquarters for Operation Trinity. He knew Freeman's office was there now, because he'd called down and asked for him, hanging up when the operator put him through to extension 8293.

Late in the afternoon, Freeman came out of headquarters and went to his car. Kolsnar followed him uptown. He made two stops at what looked like regular storefronts, stayed about twenty minutes in each place, and moved on.

The next stop was at a place called Big Dot's Jungle Bar on a quiet street in TriBeCa. He stayed there for two hours. When he came out, it was about seven o'clock. The cop looked a little tanked.

Kolsnar followed Freeman down to Washington Square and the NYU area. Just to the east of most of the university buildings, Freeman parked on a quaint side street with bare winter trees, almost a mews, and walked half a block to a small, four-story apartment building, disappearing inside. Kolsnar passed Freeman's car slowly, then the little apartment house, and found a place to park about a half block further on.

He waited twenty minutes, and assumed Freeman would at least be a few minutes more. So he got out and started walking back toward the apartment house.

Just then Freeman came out with a pretty blond woman and two young boys and started walking toward him. He had no choice but to continue on as if nothing were the matter, but he dropped his head a bit

and looked at the sidewalk until they passed. They were laughing and talking as they walked on down to the corner.

Kolsnar ducked down the two steps to a brownstone entrance and watched through the grating until they reached the corner, then followed them at a faster gait. He raced through his mind and all he knew about Freeman to date. This wasn't his home. He knew that from a morning session he'd spent in an Internet café on Amsterdam Avenue researching the cop on Google. He knew he lived in Brooklyn's Bay Section. Kolsnar was stumped.

At the corner, he saw them half a block further on, across the street, buying tickets to the latest Pixar movie. They went in and Kolsnar walked back down the block to the apartment house. He looked over the names on the intercom buzzer and came across the name McTaggart.

The cop he'd killed.

Second floor.

Apartment C.

Kolsnar felt a tingling shudder move down his spine as he thought of McTaggart, the night he shot him, the pretty blonde woman walking with Freeman, the two young boys.

Obviously, Freeman was just keeping them company. His dead friend's wife, her two sons, the movie. Surely it was a hard thing for a woman to take, losing her husband like that, to cope with it all. Freeman was just acting out the part of a Good Samaritan, helping the woman and her kids through a hard time.

Kolsnar shrugged it off. He checked with the movie house to see when the film let out, and then went for a walk in nearby Washington Square for a while, waiting. But it was getting later and the cold got to him, so he went into a bar close by and drank a few Dewar's on the rocks, which took the chill off and warmed his chest and stomach.

When they came out of the movie house, he followed them back to the apartment, then sat in his car. Freeman came out in half an hour

and Kolsnar followed him across the Brooklyn Bridge to his house. Kolsnar drove around the neighborhood, getting a feel for it, and then drove back to the Upper West Side where he turned in his car.

Walking back to his hideaway, he stopped on a corner and used his new cell phone to punch in the number Siv Pearlman had given him.

There was a click as the voice message was activated. He heard a single word: “No,” and hung up. Siv had come up with nothing so far. Or rather, Siv had come up with nothing he wanted to share with him. It could be either way. Kolsnar didn’t trust Pearlman an inch.

He planned to follow Freeman again tomorrow—and probably all week unless Pearlman answered “Yes” one day—but wanted to get a different car every morning. He might go back to the bank in two days and get another set of IDs. That, plus changing the car daily, would throw enough variety into the tail so that even an experienced cop like Freeman wouldn’t smell a scent.

Maybe he was being too cautious in tailing the cop. He didn’t want to lull himself into a false sense of security or superiority just because Freeman was good. But he realized that with a cop like Freeman, somebody who wasn’t on the city payroll just to pick up a check every Friday, he couldn’t be too careful.

And there was always the fact that he had plenty of time on his hands—waiting to hear from Siv.

## Chapter 24

*January 16 – 2:14 P.M.*

Kolsnar got another car and followed Freeman from his house in the morning, stopping behind him and watching all day long. Freeman was in headquarters twice, made ten different stops, apparently having something to do with Operation Trinity, stopped once at Big Dot's Jungle Bar for an hour and a half, and ended up the evening at the McTaggart apartment.

As he sat freezing outside the apartment house that night, Kolsnar went over the day and convinced himself that he hadn't learned anything additional from Freeman's movements except that perhaps Big Dot's Jungle Bar was his regular watering hole.

Which was something.

But at two in the morning, when Freeman still had not come out of the McTaggart building, Kolsnar knew he could probably add a piece of important information to what he already knew: Freeman was fucking his dead partner's wife. There was no other reason to explain why he would be there this late. It was way past the bedtime story hour when they would have put the kids to bed. No, he was up there fucking the blonde girl's eyes out while he sat there freezing his butt off. He was determined to wait out the cop until morning—and then he would be certain.

He drove around the neighborhood until he found an all-night diner. A couple of cups of coffee later he felt human again. He ordered some eggs, sausage, hash browns and toast, gulped the breakfast down and felt even more rosy, even though he couldn't help feeling guilty about eating the sausages, knowing how bad they were for him. He hadn't been to a gym since this whole mess blew up in his face. That shit could wait.

Then he returned to his vigil, driving by to make sure Freeman's car hadn't moved.

At six-thirty, he finally came out—dressed in another outfit. Now Kolsnar was sure. He and the girl were having an affair. It would have been interesting to know more about his motives. Kolsnar could not be sure Freeman wasn't just taking advantage of an easy situation to get a little pussy. Maybe they'd been fooling around while the partner was still alive. Or he might have been pressed into it by the wife and not known how to get out of it very easily. Hell, he could even be in love with the girl. What did he know? It was, however, very important to find out which was the case. Anyway, he decided he would have to go on tailing him to find out more.

### *January 16 – 4:30 P.M.*

After Freeman had made a few stops and returned to headquarters (where he thought he would stay awhile), Kolsnar drove down to TriBeCa and pulled over on Blyton Street, a couple of blocks from Big Dot's Jungle Bar. He wanted to have a look inside. Dressed in his Carl Bridges disguise, he walked in and took the second stool at the bar.

He tried to relax, but he felt considerably strained. He never even unbuttoned his peacoat.

He ordered a Miller Lite and drank it slowly as he checked the bar with his trained eye. There was an ancient mirror—cloudy with age—behind the bar that ran the whole length of the place. Some really threadbare thatching ran above the bar stools. He wasn't impressed either by the bar or Big Dot, and wondered what a guy like Freeman found so compelling about the place.

It certainly could lay no claim to being the busiest of bars. (Maybe that was what Freeman liked about it.) In fact, there was only one other customer in the place.

Big Dot remained at the other end of the long bar, engrossed in the *Post*.

Kolsnar got a quarter out of his pocket and tapped it three times on the bar. Big Dot matter-of-factly folded the *Post* without looking up and laid it on the bar, walking down the length of the room towards Kolsnar.

“Same again?” asked a bored Big Dot.

“Yeah.”

Big Dot leaned over a rusty cooler, affording Kolsnar a fine view of her ill-fitting wig, and pulled out a bottle of Miller Lite.

She didn’t bother to get a fresh glass, but just twisted off the cap, flicked her wrist over the old glass and filled it half way. She unceremoniously slapped the bottle down on the bar beside the glass, took some cash, made some change. She walked back down to the end of the bar, picked up the *Post*.

Just then, the door opened with a rattle, and Kolsnar could feel the cold on his back. He suppressed his instinct to turn to see who it was.

He knew—somehow—that it was Freeman.

The lieutenant walked down the length of the bar and sat on the last stool.

“Hey, Big Dot. How’s it goin’?”

“Been better. Howyadoin’?”

“So-so.”

Big Dot pulled up a bottle of Jack Daniels with one hand. A glass magically appeared instantly in the other, so fast you’d assume she’d been holding it all the time.

Kolsnar tried to maintain a disinterested air. Fortunately, both of them spoke in loud voices. He could easily hear everything.

“How’s the grind?” asked Big Dot.

“Just that—a grind,” said a weary Freeman. “I’ve been working with the boys, taking a few of the calls, trying to crack a lead on Simon. He’s all we’ve got to work with—him and that Kolsnar guy.”

“The one with the bonds.”

“Yeah, him. The Simon thing will fall together. It just needs a little time. Kolsnar is going to be a little tougher, but that one will come together, too. Just takes time. I met with his wife, did I tell you?”

“No.”

Kolsnar listened as Freeman told Big Dot about his lunch in the fancy Le Jardin de Fleurs. How his sister Helen knew Loretta. And how Loretta had been struck dumb by everything Kolsnar had done.

“I’m going to push his case a couple of days, go over the ground the other boys have covered, interview a few, see what I come up with.”

“Same old shit,” said Big Dot. “Never seems to change.”

Kolsnar could see Freeman clearly in the dusky mirror. He only dared look at him when he lifted his glass to drink his beer. He knew Freeman was top-notch. The news conference had convinced him of that much. And he also knew that if Freeman got too close to look at him he might see through the disguise. He didn’t want to look too freely at him in the mirror, but the raised glass covered his features a little better. A couple of times he raised his glass and let the beer touch his lips, pretended to sip, but didn’t. He didn’t want to drink his beer up and have to call Big Dot down for another. Might draw Freeman’s attention to him, if only for a couple of seconds, and that might be all Freeman needed to notice something.

*Be very, very careful,* he told himself.

He’d been toying with the idea of dropping his tail. Now, because he had overheard Freeman’s plans, he would have to keep it up. To see where Freeman went. To find out who he interviewed. Otherwise, he wouldn’t know what Freeman was finding out each step of the way, and he’d be in the bad position of having to guess.

Just like Freeman was doing every day.

And he didn't want to have to guess what Freeman was up to now he knew he was concentrating on his part of the case.

"I hope you get the son of a bitch," Big Dot was saying.

"I'll get him," the cocky cop answered. "He killed my partner, and I'll get him. Sooner or later, he's mine."

*We'll just see about that*, thought Kolsnar, taking an ever-so-slow sip from his glass.

## Chapter 25

*January 17 – 10:10 A.M.*

Freeman, with Speedy and Pat in tow, marched through the main hall of the American Museum of Natural History on Central Park West. He had the twins all morning. Patricia was at work and Freeman was playing hooky.

He paid the suggested entry fees for one adult and two kids. Then they looked over the exhibits, and both boys wanted to see the one on “The Horse.”

*Fine with me*, thought Freeman. *If I'd been a sheriff a hundred years ago instead of a detective today, I'd be riding a horse.*

The boys were so cute. Most people couldn't tell one from the other, but he could. Speedy had a tiny mole on his left earlobe. Both boys were gorgeous towheads and had pretty blue eyes. Pat had a slight discoloration in his right eye, but that was about all there was to tell the difference. They looked like beautiful little girls at this age, but he knew they would grow up to be as good looking as their very gorgeous parents.

They trudged toward the exhibition hall, got lost twice, but finally found the right spot.

There was quite a bit to learn about horses, Freeman quickly saw. The Evolution of the Horse, Horses & Hunters, Domesticating Horses, the Nature of Horses, How We Shaped Horses and How They Shaped Us. He had no idea, for instance, that the nearest relative to the horse was the rhinoceros because they have an odd number of toes. Other mammals like goats, pigs, cows and camels have cloven hooves, or two toes.

*Go figure*, he thought.

He noted the exhibit was a collaboration with the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, whatever the fuck that was. How

much culture could they have in a desert? Where *was* Abu Dhabi, anyway? Was that Dubai? With the palm tree islands?

*These people are just taking over New York*, he thought. You had the Pakis, the Koreans, the Muslims.

He smiled to himself. Surely the Indians said the same thing when the Dutch wanted to move north of Wall Street.

On the way out, they stopped for a bathroom break.

“Go in with your brother, Speedy.”

“But I don’t have to go,” Speedy whined.

Freeman knelt down.

“Lissen! You *have* to watch out for each other, you and Pat, see? You have to take care of each other.”

Speedy nodded. Pat nodded.

They marched into the men’s room while he waited outside. He saw a poster across the marble hall for an exhibit on butterflies: “The Butterfly Conservatory: Tropical Butterflies Alive in Winter.”

That was the difference between him and Patricia, he thought. Patricia was a butterfly. Freeman was a horse.

### *January 17 – 8:25 P.M.*

While on the private plane that took him to Washington a couple of days before the Inaugural, Russ Tiller couldn’t wait to get to the small get-together the outgoing President always threw for the incoming President and other bigwigs a couple of hours before the swearing-in ceremony. As an ex-President, he counted as one of those bigwigs.

The only person he really cared to see was Matt Hawkins, the up-start congressman (now senator) who’d played kingmaker by casting the vote that threw the election to St. Clair.

Tiller glanced ahead of him a couple of rows where Meredith and Chloe were in some deep conversation around a small conference table between their two seats.

When Thurston had prevailed on him to come down to Washington a couple of days before the historic vote to lean on the fence sitters, Tiller had met with Hawkins, among others. Hawkins had not struck him as being much more than the naive freshman congressman that he was. Tiller had not conceived it possible the whole election would hinge on his single vote. He'd had no inkling of the machinations that had obviously been going on behind the scenes.

Now, at this juncture, what he wanted to assess was how much steam this Hawkins character might have in the years just ahead. Tiller hadn't forgotten how an unknown senator from Illinois had literally come out of nowhere to challenge the then frontrunner Hillary Clinton and then gone on to beat her for the Democratic nomination.

Hillary had been lucky to be young enough to run again eight years later. Tiller didn't want his wife to have to wait. Like Hillary, she had served as secretary of state. Tiller felt the timing was perfect for Meredith to run in four years. He wanted to make it his business, first, to assess what Hawkins's ambitions were, and second, to throw up whatever roadblocks he could conjure up to derail the young man's plans.

He made a mental note to set aside time to have a private conversation with Speaker Lamar LeGrand Perryman at the coffee reception. There were very few more clever or devious minds in Washington than Perryman's.

## Chapter 26

*January 17 – 10:25 P.M.*

Kolsnar was getting more and more impatient. And worried. He'd been doggedly following Freeman, getting things just right in his mind about how and when to move against the copper.

Besides Freeman, Kolsnar's mind dwelt endlessly on the bonds.

There was still no change in Siv Pearlman's voice recording.

"No."

Freeman had gone down to Gerard, Nugent & Co. several times, and Kolsnar knew he was spending a lot of time with Park Cunningham, and that Randolph Gerard would give the cop full access to every file, full run of the place. Everything would be handed to Freeman on a silver platter. It only remained for the cop to use his mind, find a lead, track it to him. "Sooner or later," as Freeman had put it that afternoon in Big Dot's, the cop would get the right lead to the right snitch and eventually find his way to one of the black market guys Kolsnar had been in touch with about the bonds. None of them knew where he was hiding out. Kolsnar had that much sense. Of all the black market dealers Kolsnar had contacted, he considered Siv Pearlman to be the most important. If Freeman ever found his way to Pearlman, the cop would make the ugly man think twice. Kolsnar would never see the bonds, never have any chance of recovering them.

Freeman was a good cop—too good. Kolsnar had been following Freeman the day before and was a bit surprised when Freeman pulled up and double-parked in front of Kolsnar's old apartment building. Obviously, Freeman was there to interview his wife. It wasn't just a cursory interview, either; Freeman stayed for two hours. The cop was really trying to get to know him. He squirmed inside with the uneasy sensation he was succeeding.

Pearlman was on Kolsnar's mind every bit as much as Freeman. At least he had the advantage of knowing what Freeman was up to day after day. He didn't have any idea what Pearlman was doing. Of all the better dealers in the black market, Pearlman was the most likely to work a deal with the gang—and also the most likely to cross Kolsnar. Pearlman was one of the few—probably the only—dealer who could conceivably get away with it if he handled it properly. Kolsnar had tried to put the fear of God into Siv when they met on Fulton Street, but Siv wasn't the kind to scare easily. Kolsnar knew that. And Pearlman knew Kolsnar knew it. And that Kolsnar was a very desperate man.

Kolsnar had reminded Pearlman that he no longer had anything—*anything*—to lose. He'd killed a cop. He was a dead man if they caught him. Kolsnar had killed before, of course, much more often when he was working abroad where the "rules" were a lot looser. But now he'd killed a cop—things were different. Killing now wasn't a matter of desperation, but one of strategy.

In following Freeman, Kolsnar was trying to size him up. Size up his talent (Freeman got high marks); size up his professionalism (Freeman was a tough pro); size up his vulnerability (Freeman seemed to have none—he spent little time with his wife or at home, and seemed only to have time (when there was spare time) for Patricia McTaggart and her two boys.

Kolsnar was also trying to decide if he should kill Freeman, and was weighing the advantages and disadvantages of such a move.

There were no real disadvantages if Freeman just died. The disadvantages came into play if Kolsnar tried to kill the cop himself. There were two places to do it: when he was entering or leaving Big Dot's Jungle Bar (leaving would be better, since he'd have a few drinks of bourbon in him and his reactions would be slower) or entering or leaving the McTaggart building. Big Dot's was a better choice because the location was less busy than the street in front of the McTaggart building. No, there were no real disadvantages in killing Freeman.

The advantages were many. He was convinced already that Freeman was the best cop working Operation Trinity. He was the one most likely to get close enough to him to do any harm, to frustrate his attempt to recover the bonds. If he tried to kill Freeman, and succeeded or failed, chances were the blame would be laid on the gang that robbed the church, *not him*, though he couldn't be sure of that. But the main advantage in Freeman's death: the gang would have more time to sell the bonds, and Kolsnar would have an easier time recovering them.

It wouldn't be necessary to kill Freeman if the cops had any solid leads on the gang. But he knew they had very little so far, except for the fake "usher." They'd been fools to release that footage, thought Kolsnar, tipping off the gang that they had such a solid lead.

In his own case, the cops knew exactly who it was they were hunting. Add to all this Amos Freeman's personal vendetta for the dead ex-partner and it looked bad for Kolsnar.

There was no way around it. Freeman had to go, in his own words, "sooner or later."

And as far as Kolsnar was concerned, the sooner the better.

## Chapter 27

*January 17 – 11:45 P.M.*

Manny Branch went into a McDonald's in Flatbush to order a Big Mac. The boy at the counter was a dark-skinned Latin with bad skin. He reminded him a little of Luis Amagno. He'd had pockmarks, the result of untreated teenage acne. He fingered the \$20 bill in his hands as he stared at the boy. Maybe he was seventeen, eighteen. Nice body, for a kid who didn't work out. If he had a choice, he liked them that way, natural.

"Sir?"

He realized the boy had been speaking to him. The two black women in front of him had moved down the line a full fifteen seconds earlier.

"Uh, yeah. Lemme have two Big Macs."

"Combos?" asked the boy, hovering over his register.

"Sure."

"Drinks?"

"Milk for one, coffee the other."

He forked over his twenty, got his change and receipt, moved down the line. Two Latin girls moved up behind him. The boredom that envelops working class teenagers took a temporary back seat as the girls smiled at him. The boy smiled back. Manny smiled, too, but inside, not on his face.

He collected his order and went to a four-top (he didn't like sitting at two-tops), leaving his tray while he went to get the coffee. One Half-n-Half, an Equal.

He scalded his lower lip on the coffee, remembered that bitch who'd sued McDonald's because the coffee was too hot. Now, there it was on the side of the Styrofoam cup: WARNING: HOT COFFEE.

*Stupid bitch.*

The milk was nice and cold. He twisted off the cap. The milk container at McDonald's was much better than the one at Burger King, where they had a piece of tin foil sealing the thing under the twist-off plastic top. Took about thirty seconds to get that fucker peeled off so you could drink the God damn milk. Pissed him off every time he went to Burger King. He even thought if he ran Burger King and wanted a promotion, all he ever had to do was go into a meeting of all the big shots with a bunch of milks from McDonald's and a bunch of milks from Burger King, distribute them around the big boardroom table and say: "Okay, guys. Open both containers." Why nobody at Burger King was smart enough to figure that out was beyond him. After all, *he* figured it out.

*What was wrong with them?*

He finished off the first Big Mac.

Normally, for breakfast, he liked the Croissan'wich (with sausage) better than the Sausage McMuffin with Egg. The bread was softer, more flavorful. The English muffins at McDonald's got hard as boards if they sat around for any length of time. The Croissan'wich was so soft. You could even eat it cold and it was pretty good. He wasn't a big fan of their Enormous Omelet Sandwich because they put too much crappy cheese on it. Gummed up your teeth like shit. Took an hour to get it all out. And it was way fattening. He'd only ordered it one time. Threw half of it away.

Chewing slowly, savoring the second Big Mac, he looked at the boy behind the counter. He was suddenly aware he'd decided (without really thinking about it) to sit *facing* the boy instead of away from him.

The boy had the same nicely shaped natural body that Richard Whitney had. Branch had always been careful to work out religiously when he was in prison. Once he got used to having sex with guys, it made a lot of sense to have the kind of body that allowed you to pick and choose. He still didn't think of himself as queer. Not that he gave it all that much thought. It's just that he was *around* men all the time.

And there was *no way* he was going to let Richard Whitney off the hook once he made that first pass. He made up his mind then and there to work the priest for everything he could get. The main thing, of course, was for Whitney to play the system, write positive reports about him, keep urging Dr. White to recommend early parole. Whitney's solicitations to the parole board had been the clinching factor.

Once he actually got out of prison, he'd planned to put a lot of distance between him and Whitney, but when the idea of robbing Trinity Church came up, he'd let Whitney basically have his body any time he wanted it. He'd even fucked the priest on the divan in Father Parkhurst's office once, when the old man was in England at something called the Lambeth Conference.

Someone was coming in to replace the boy behind the counter. Manny Branch smiled. He drank the last of his coffee and took his trash to the cans by the exit, toying with the idea of waiting for the boy out back when he left the building.

Naw, he reconsidered. The boy might freak out, and the last thing Manny Branch needed now was for a passing cop to stop him.

For anything. Especially for something as minor as making a pass at a boy.

It was the nearly the end of January, with the new President getting sworn in soon.

He had things to do.

Especially a lot of loose ends to wrap up before he started getting laid again.

## Chapter 28

*January 18 – 5:30 P.M.*

Over the next few days, Kolsnar got to know Freeman's habits by rote. If things were relatively slow at headquarters, Freeman would drop by Big Dot's about two in the afternoon for about a half-hour to forty-five minutes; but he'd usually come back between four-thirty and five-thirty and stay about an hour, getting half tanked in the process.

He followed Freeman most of the day. The cop was making more and more stops that related to the Kolsnar case. Kolsnar was happy he'd decided not to put off any longer the business planned for today. It was time to do it. Quicker the better.

Freeman was running around town, just methodically pushing along at an unhurried pace. (Not that the cop couldn't do a lot every day. Kolsnar marveled that Freeman could see ten to fifteen people in a day, stop at Big Dot's twice, have dinner with Patricia McTaggart and her boys, stay two hours afterwards to see the boys put to bed and long enough to get fucked, and be home in time to sit up with his wife—and not seem to be rushing it.)

Freeman made his first stop at Big Dot's about two-fifteen, a little late. (This meant his second stop would be a little later than normal, too, which pleased Kolsnar, because that would make it later, and darker, when he came out.)

Kolsnar decided to go ahead and beat Freeman down to Big Dot's. He would wait for the cop there. He parked his car on the east side of the cross street, catty-corner from Big Dot's, which was on the west side corner of Blyton. Kolsnar walked down the east side of Blyton until he stood close to the corner, directly opposite Big Dot's Blyton entrance.

Everything looked perfect.

It was Saturday, so there was no office-worker foot traffic filling the sidewalks, and very few people walking up and down either side of the

street. By the time Freeman walked out of the bar, it would be dark, and chances were good to excellent that there would be no one on the freezing cold street when Kolsnar's shot Freeman, using a silencer. If there was a witness, it didn't matter to Kolsnar, as long as the witness was just a witness and didn't involve his stupid ass with Freeman and him. Kolsnar was planning to ditch the rented car and abandon his Tom Schneeberger identity that very night. There could never be a trace to him. It didn't matter what any single witness saw.

Kolsnar examined the entrance to Big Dot's more carefully than he ever had before. The door itself was probably fifteen to twenty feet from the cross street curb, about seven or eight feet from the Blyton Street curb.

There were two obstacles. One was the old cast iron lamppost on the Blyton curb that was not quite directly in front of the entrance to Big Dot's; not quite, but close enough to be annoying. Close enough to take into account. Close enough to work around. It was protection enough if Freeman got behind it. The other obstacle was Freeman's car, which he knew the cop would park illegally right in front of the door by the lamppost. And there was a fire hydrant next to the lamppost.

Kolsnar could not shoot from across the street, where he was now, and get Freeman as he came out of the bar. Unless he wanted to wait until Freeman came around the rear of the car to get to the driver's side in the street. If he decided to hit him as he opened his car door, he could do it from his car by parking on the other side of the street and waiting until Freeman's back was to him. This choice eliminated the lamppost as an obstacle, but created other problems. If Kolsnar missed and didn't get a second shot off in time, all Freeman had to do to be safe was dive into the car and get the door closed. Then, when Kolsnar drove off down Blyton, Freeman could very easily follow him, get on the radio, have other units in the area in seconds, and Kolsnar would be nailed.

The first shot was *that* crucial.

The other option was to park his car on Blyton, like Freeman's, but further down, on the downtown side of the cross street. Kolsnar could wait for Freeman around the corner of the bar, just fifteen feet from the door. When Freeman came out, he would turn uptown (with his back towards the cross street) to walk behind and around his car to the driver's side. Kolsnar could nail him right then: just as he turned his back and started walking. Kolsnar would be only seven feet from the curb and car, and about five feet from the lamppost and hydrant.

The risk would be greater in one sense, less in another. Greater in that Kolsnar would not be in his car, ready to make a run for it, but would have to go back to his car after shooting Freeman. Less, in that he would be closer to Freeman and have a much better chance of killing (rather than wounding) him. It was going to be dark, and to have to shoot from across the street in a deep winter twilight would be hard even for a good shot like Kolsnar.

He waited in the doorway of the closed shop across from Big Dot's, hidden in shadows by the natural alcove created by the entranceway.

Freeman finally showed up. Kolsnar glanced at his watch. It was five past five. Freeman was late, which was good. It was already beginning to darken rapidly. And it would be at least six before Freeman came out again. A full hour to wait.

Kolsnar watched Freeman go into the bar, and stayed where he was for a while. He didn't have to worry about being seen on the street from the bar. Freeman sat at the far end of the room, and Big Dot would be down there talking to him. And no one had entered the bar in the time Kolsnar had been watching it. He and Big Dot were probably alone.

Kolsnar went back to his car, hidden from view around the corner. He was freezing, his fingers were stiff. He needed to limber up. He switched on the car and turned the heat on, flexing his fingers. He checked his gun and sat back to relax for a few minutes.

When Freeman had been in Big Dot's for roughly a half hour, Kolsnar moved. It was time to get ready. He pulled the car into Blyton and

took a left. There was almost no traffic. No one to speak of on the sidewalks, either.

*Perfect.*

He eased past the bar. No activity. A dull light squeezed through the grimy plate glass window carrying the name of the bar in large, ugly Old English lettering that had faded into the soot and grime covering the glass, and you couldn't see a thing inside. Freeman's car was still in place. The cop had probably punched back five or six straight shots of Jack Daniels by now. (When Kolsnar was in the bar with Freeman the other day, he'd put away four shots of booze. Big Dot had asked him sarcastically why he was drinking so little today, and Freeman had responded that he wanted to take it easy while he was working. Big Dot had said, "Yeah, well, you always make up for it when ya come in here at sundown.") Kolsnar was counting on Freeman being half polluted by the time he walked out in twenty minutes or a half hour. He wanted the cop to have a nice warm glow in his stomach.

Kolsnar pulled up in front of Freeman's car, waited for a green light, and crossed to park on the west side corner.

He waited five minutes. He wanted to be as warm as he could for as long as he could. No sense in standing out there in the freezing cold any longer than he had to. His fingers might get tight. He turned the engine off and got out of the car.

All he had to do now was cross the street and stand around the corner from the bar entrance. When Freeman came out, he would step around the corner and nail him in the back.

From fifteen feet, he couldn't miss. He'd get two, maybe three shots in him at least, before having to run. He'd go for the upper back the first two shots, the head if he got time for a third.

Kolsnar stepped off the curb to cross the street. The sky was clear, the air cold, fresh, pure. The snow had stopped the day before and he could see a thousand stars twinkling overhead. No wind. He'd hear the door open with no trouble.

He stepped up on the curb and was making for the corner of the building when the door to Big Dot's opened abruptly and Freeman stepped out into the street.

Kolsnar was in mid stride when Freeman glanced at him. Kolsnar took another step towards the corner, but Freeman had only glanced his way, and had already turned his back, walking away from him.

Kolsnar stopped, hesitating now, decided in a second whether he should pull his gun and do it. He was taken off guard.

Freeman hadn't kept to schedule.

It was too late *not* to draw. Freeman had heard him take two steps and had not heard a third. He knew something was wrong. Freeman turned just as Kolsnar drew his gun and fired. Freeman had turned towards the car and the lamppost. Kolsnar's shot missed him by inches.

He shot a second time, hitting Freeman in the right arm as that same arm was reaching for his shoulder holster. Freeman fell behind the lamppost and hydrant and between them and his car. Kolsnar went for the head, but hit the hydrant instead with a brittle *PING*, as the bullet ricocheted off the hydrant and slammed into the grimy plate glass window of the Jungle Bar, shattering it.

Again he fired, this time hitting Freeman in the right calf.

*Now, he turned and ran like a scared rabbit.*

By the time Freeman had whipped his pistol out with a bent-under left hand and gotten off a shot, Kolsnar had started his engine. Freeman lurched to his feet, half stumbling on his right foot, not realizing he'd been hit in the leg. He regained himself, got off two more shots as the car (it looked like a late model Camry—and he couldn't see the plate) raced away down Blyton. Freeman watched the car, wincing in pain. It made a left a couple of blocks down.

Big Dot was next to him by now.

*"For Christ's sake, what—!"*

Freeman didn't hear her.

He'd already opened the curbside car door and had his radio in his good left hand.

## Chapter 29

*January 19 – 10:12 A.M.*

It was all over the papers the next morning, so much so that Freeman wished the son of a bitch had shot him well after midnight before the final editions had gone to bed.

The papers all carried front-page articles on the shooting, not (thought Freeman, cynically) because Amos Freeman could have been killed, but because this was the first exciting thing to happen since Operation Trinity was organized.

Freeman was home now, it was mid-morning, and he was royally pissed off.

The night before he'd called on his radio for help in stopping the fleeing car (he thought it was a Camry), but the first donkey turd who answered the call came to *him*—didn't go after the fucking car, no. Came to *him* instead. What kind of a cop is that? You go after the fucking suspect first, not a wounded cop. Pissed him off.

Anyway, ten units responded to the call, and more zoomed out of precinct stations within five minutes of Freeman's call. But the son of a bitch got away.

Plain and simple.

And no reason for it.

They *had* him! All they had to do was stop the bastard. But they didn't do it. Didn't do it.

And Freeman was sitting home with his right arm in a fucking *sling!*

*There's a first for everything*, he thought angrily.

The first unit had come to him. He had lead in his right arm and right leg, and though he had been shot (nothing too serious) a couple

of times before (and knew what it felt like), he was so mad he didn't really feel the bullets in him at first (he felt the one in the arm more than the one in his calf.)

Minutes later an ambulance had shown up. Other units arrived. He kept asking the cops that came if they'd gotten the guy, but nobody gave him a decent answer.

A couple of the boys in white coats took his jacket off, then ripped off his white shirt, then did a little first aid shit, and then put him in an ambulance (*"I don't need a fucking ambulance! I can walk, God damn it!"*), and before he knew it, he was in the hospital, more pissed off than ever.

He didn't sleep all night. About 5 A.M. he called the cop stationed outside his door (by special order of the commissioner himself) and told him to get a patrol car to take him home or he'd start raising hell like the poor boy had never seen before. The cop called the night duty head nurse and Freeman gave her the same routine and told her to get his clothes out or he'd break the woman's jaw. She said she'd see what she could do, phone the doctor, etc. He said, "Fuck, phone the mayor, but I'm getting out of here, and I mean *now!*"

She came back in five minutes and told him Commissioner Haffey said it was okay to let him go.

"I told you to call the mayor, not the *commissioner!*"

But they let him go. Even though they stationed two men in his front yard. (Angie insisted they come into the kitchen for coffee every hour, which they did, taking turns outside.)

About 9 A.M., he sent one of the guards out for all the morning papers, and when he read them, he was really pissed off. He wanted to get on the phone and raise a lot of hell, but he didn't know who to call.

He was pissed something fierce. Who could he call?

He called Rafaela Salguero.

"Rafaela, what's all this crap in the papers?"

“Brother, you’re the big news, can’t you read? After Anderson told everybody how you had such a crackerjack record solving the Great American Murder, well, when this thing happened, everybody picked up on it right away. Lucky son of a bitch.”

“*Lucky!*”

“Yeah, you’ll probably make captain ’fore you know it. By special order of the mayor.”

“*Fuck!*”

“Terrible. Just terrible, being a celebrity.”

“A celebrity!”

“Yeah.”

“*Damn it!*”

That conversation didn’t last long. Freeman didn’t mind getting shot so much. It was the *publicity* he hated. Obviously, the member of the gang who shot him, and the whole gang itself, knew everything that was going on with him, everything he was doing. All they had to do was read the God damn paper.

*This is no way to catch a killer. No way at all.*

It was eleven-thirty now. Angie came up, breathless.

“*The mayor’s coming to see you!*”

“Oh, shit,” he drawled.

“How can you say that?”

“Tell me he’s coming *by himself* and I won’t say that.”

“I don’t know who he’s coming with.”

“I’ll tell you who he’s coming with. He’s bringing everybody in New York City that has a pad, pencil, camera or mike, that’s who he’s bringing. Worse than the Ringling Brothers Circus.”

It turned out to be just as much a horror show as Freeman figured it would be.

The mayor sailed in with a full entourage of underlings and the press corps following in his wake. Freeman clenched his teeth as the

cameras shot him while Lindstadt spoke in grave tones by his side about the atrocity committed against law and order.

*And all the usual bullshit.*

Between the questions from the press, and after Freeman had mumbled a few words for the microphones, he tugged at Lindstadt's sleeve. The mayor leaned over.

"What is it, Amos?"

"Mr. Mayor," Freeman whispered in Lindstadt's ear, "you've got to get these people out of here. It's very bad."

"I can't do that."

"Then cut it as short as you can."

Lindstadt did succeed in cutting the proceedings shorter, and in clearing the room for a "private moment" with the stricken policeman. (Freeman wanted to roll his eyes when Lindstadt said that to the press.)

When they were alone, Lindstadt turned to him.

"Now what's this all about?"

"Mr. Mayor, you've got to keep the press *away* from me."

"Why, what's the matter?"

Freeman looked away desperately, nearly in tears. "Because I can't *do* anything if there's all this media crap. It's just got to *stop*. I can't do a thing. It's making me helpless. You can't find a killer if he knows you're waiting around the next corner."

"But the people see that we're getting somewhere," Lindstadt said, his face wrinkled with frowns.

"Mayor, it looks good for you to be able to come to a cop that's been shot up, but it doesn't do me worth shit, you understand?"

Lindstadt nodded, still frowning.

"We think in different ways, Freeman, you and me. My success depends on public exposure. Yours is killed by it. I understand. I'll get everybody out of here. And I'll do my best to keep them away from you."

“Good, Mr. Mayor. You do that, and keep them away, and maybe I’ll get us a killer. Fair?”

“More than fair.”

## Chapter 30

*January 19 – 1:11 P.M.*

Kolsnar was overjoyed when he read the newspapers the next morning.

He watched all the news channels. He bought and read every newspaper he could find—and his name wasn't mentioned once. Not once. Everyone automatically assumed the gang was behind the shooting.

This was just what Kolsnar wanted—he could do anything he wanted and the blame would be laid on the robbers, not him. The obvious occurred to him immediately. The more he could do to increase the attention of the authorities on finding the gang, the less those same authorities would consider him a higher priority. Currently, his was the only name they had, the only firm identity, besides the robber who played usher that night. Freeman had been working on Kolsnar's case, not the gang's. Now the tables were turned, the focus shifted.

Again today there had been a “No” on Siv Pearlman's voice mail. And Kolsnar was becoming anxious about his bonds. And he was at a point where he felt he had to start pressing Siv for more information, more positive action. The longer he gave Pearlman to find the bonds, the longer Siv would have to figure out a way to double-cross him.

Kolsnar considered various things he could do to keep the cops thinking the gang was active.

Not really to keep the cops thinking.

But to keep Freeman thinking.

He'd hit Freeman last night, and the fallout in the press was just perfect. Kolsnar was thinking of lying low for a while, letting things cool off, then hit him again. That was one approach.

After some consideration, he rejected it. He wanted his bonds as soon as he could get them. There was no reason to relax the pressure on Freeman just now. Not while the gang was uppermost in Freeman's mind.

No, it would not do to hold off.

Tomorrow night was as good as any other to make another move—better in fact, than waiting any longer.

# Chapter 31

*January 20 – 9:17 A.M.*

Freeman reported for duty at special headquarters, arm in sling. The hell with what the doctors had ordered. Two hours after he arrived people were *still* coming in to see him, to tell him how sorry they were he got hit, how bad they felt because they didn't get the guy who did it, etc., etc.

Et *fucking* cetera.

“Don't worry, fellas,” he told everybody, “this kid's okay.”

But he knew the kid wasn't okay, not entirely, anyway. The kid was getting older. His reflexes weren't all they should be. He knew he should have been able to move faster when that guy came on him like that. He knew he shouldn't have turned his back like that. And wouldn't have a few years ago. He knew he should've been able to get his gun out faster. He also knew the guy—if he'd had a little more guts—could have finished him off right then and there with another shot or two. The thought that he came so close was scary.

*Plus his arm hurt like a son of a bitch.*

And his leg didn't feel too swell either.

It was Thursday, nearly the end of January. He planned to go through all the paperwork that had piled up. See what the boys had been doing while he was “away,” then meet with the mayor tomorrow at noon.

There was no aspect of the attempted murder that eluded him, or so he thought, except one, and it was this: with so many members in the gang, why had they elected to use only one man against him. It would have been much more effective—conclusive even—if they'd used two men. He'd be dead now if they had.

He knew that.

*And it scared him shitless.*

But that was the only thing he questioned about the shooting.

Everything else was cut and dried. They'd nailed him good. Put his right arm out of action for a while. Hit him in the leg. (He limped a little, but the wound in the calf was very superficial. He could still get around okay.) Mostly, when he thought about it long enough, it was his pride that had suffered the most damage.

He awkwardly twisted the upper half of the silver Cross pen Angie had given him at Christmas. The point disappeared. He had to hold the bottom half in his right hand (in the sling).

*Nothing's easy with this damned sling.*

Still, it could be worse. Freeman regarded the pen with skepticism.

Nice pen.

Looks expensive.

Probably is.

He stuck the pen in his pocket and leaned back in his chair.

"This kid's a little tired," he said aloud.

He glanced at his wristwatch. It was eleven. His cell phone rang. It was Patricia.

"Amos?"

"Hi, sweetie," he said.

"Hi—feel like having lunch with me?"

"Well, sure. What's on the menu?"

"Your favorite—shrimp salad."

"What's for dessert," he said with a mild leer.

"I'll let you raid the fridge."

"The fridge is not what I'll be raiding."

"Okay—come down in an hour. My mom's here playing with the kids, but she's leaving to meet some of her gal pals at the Waldorf. We'll have lunch, put the kids down for a nap and whip up that dessert."

"An hour, then."

Patricia had called the house yesterday, talked to Angie, but Angie didn't tell him she'd called until much later. Said he told Patricia he was resting, that the doctors said he wasn't to be disturbed.

Humph.

Fucking doctors.

## Chapter 32

*January 20 – 10:03 A.M.*

About 11:30, Kolsnar, dressed in the disguise of Tom Schneeberger—the same identity he'd used the night he hit Freeman, went out into the cold air and took the subway downtown.

He'd already checked to see that Freeman was at headquarters. He was likely to stay there for the rest of the day. But he would certainly drop by to see Patricia McTaggart in the early evening or night.

But she and her boys would be dead.

Kolsnar knew this would not be easy for him—and he'd been going over it in his head ever since he thought of killing the woman and the kids the day before. A million different possibilities occurred to him. He realized there was no way around his decision to kill them. If he got to the apartment and found them gone, he would come back the next afternoon—while Freeman was sitting with the mayor, as he did every Friday. They were as good as dead in Kolsnar's mind. He just wanted their deaths to do him some good. That was his only reason for killing them anyway. It was nothing personal, he kept telling himself, just like John McTaggart's death. Nothing personal. The cop simply had the bad luck to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Just like his wife and kids.

Kolsnar wondered if he were really as cold-blooded as his actions made him seem. He hadn't wanted to shoot Gerard, kill the cop, the two guards, and now the cop's wife and kids. He *did* want his fucking bonds, at all costs. These deaths, he understood, were part of those collateral costs. It was as simple as that.

The point of these additional murders was to make it appear as if the gang had killed them as a warning to Freeman to stay away from

them, get out of the investigation. On the face of it, this was totally ridiculous. The gang (or anyone), having failed to kill Freeman, would only encourage his passionate desire to catch up with them by killing Patricia McTaggart. Killing this innocent woman and her two boys was quite another thing.

And totally pointless.

Pointless for the gang. But not pointless for Kolsnar. Had he killed Freeman, everything would be great, but failing, he needed some further inducement to keep Freeman busy hunting the gang. He knew that he and his bonds would look like small potatoes after the death of Patricia McTaggart.

*And there'll be absolutely no reason for them to suspect me!*

The blame would go to the gang as naturally as the attempt on Freeman had been laid on them.

All he had to do was kill Patricia and her boys and leave. And a lot would have been accomplished.

But how would it go? He wondered about this on the train ride downtown.

She would open the door and he would walk in with his gun drawn. It would already have the silencing attachment on it in case he had to start firing right off. The whole business could be over in a single minute.

His stop came up. He got out and went up to the street and walked the few blocks to the McTaggart building. There were only a few people on the street. It was very cold.

He punched the buzzer for apartment 2/D just to make sure no one was home. Then he buzzed McTaggart in 2/C and said he was the UPS man and wanted him to take delivery for a package for 2/D.

Patricia buzzed him in immediately. He went inside and walked upstairs to the apartment. He stopped for what seemed to be a long time in front of the door, looking intently at the name plate and apartment number.

He pursed his lips and knocked firmly on the door, his gun down by his side.

Only a few seconds later Patricia McTaggart swung open the door, his eyebrows raised inquiringly when he did not see the familiar brown uniform.

Kolsnar raised his gun.

“Let me in,” he demanded quietly. A frown consumed Patricia’s face as she backed in. Kolsnar followed. He could hear the boys playing and laughing in another room.

“Who else is here?” he asked quietly.

“Just my two boys and my mother.”

*Christ!* He hadn’t counted on anybody else. Not that it mattered now. Too late to worry about the mother.

“Where are they?” he asked, just as quietly as before, closing the door behind him.

“In the boys’ room.”

“Where is it?”

She nodded down a short hallway.

He was impressed by the girl’s calmness. She was afraid, but not hysterical. She would not get hysterical, either, Kolsnar could tell that.

“What are you going to do?” she asked after they had stood there saying nothing for a few seconds.

The question jolted Kolsnar into action. He didn’t realize until Patricia spoke that he’d been standing there like a fucking buffoon holding a gun on her, saying nothing.

“In there, quietly.”

Patricia led the way into the kitchen. She stood against the refrigerator and Kolsnar backed away from her. She folded her arms across her chest as if she were chilled.

Kolsnar was about to say something like, “I’m sorry this had to happen to you,” but it didn’t seem necessary.

Kolsnar didn't want to aim at her. That might make her call out. Right now Kolsnar knew Patricia wasn't thinking about herself, but about her kids and her mother down the hall. Kolsnar had the gun already pointed at her chest, directly at the heart.

Calmly, with no emotion and not a word, he fired. A dull thud from the silencer, no more than a cough. Patricia's eyes widened, her arms fell down, she took in some breath quickly, but before she could scream, Kolsnar had raised the gun slightly, quickly, aiming for her head, and shot again, this time hitting her right above the nose, splattering her brains out of the back of her head onto the white kitchen wall. She crumpled silently into a heap on the floor.

Kolsnar took a deep breath.

This would do, he told himself, his stomach churning violently when he looked at what had been the woman's face. He could quickly leave the apartment. He didn't have to kill the boys. Or the mother. Patricia McTaggart would do well enough.

Yes, this was enough. He changed his mind about the kids and the mother. He left the kitchen and quietly made for the front door just as the boys' bedroom door opened and the mother came into the hall.

She was saying, "Patricia, who was—" before she stopped. She saw him clearly down the hall.

He froze. His gun was in his coat pocket.

*Have to finish the job now*, he thought, walking towards the older woman.

"I was just making a delivery," he said as he got closer. He didn't want to waste a shot, or give her time to call out. He could hear the boys playing in the room behind her.

"Oh? Where's my daughter?"

He was close enough now. He yanked the gun out and shot the woman in the neck. She didn't make a sound as she fell to the carpeted hallway floor.

He stepped over the woman and peered around the half-open door into the bedroom. The two boys were playing a video game on the floor, their backs to him.

He sighed heavily, pulling the door closed. Then he checked the mother. She had a feeble pulse. He could leave her. She'd probably die any minute. But she'd seen him. He stood over her and pulled out his gun and shot her in the heart. Checking again, he found no pulse.

He walked back into the kitchen to look at Patricia McTaggart's blood smeared face. No use checking her. She was very much dead.

The look of her face repulsed him. He wondered just what would go through Freeman's mind when he walked in and saw her like this.

It was enough to turn his stomach.

Kolsnar could only imagine what it would do to Amos Freeman's.

### *January 20 – 10:11 A.M.*

Tiller felt a sense of déjà vu as his limousine pulled up to the North Portico of the White House. He had a slight adrenaline rush as he remembered the first time a car delivered him to this very same location when he was being inaugurated.

He let Chloe and Meredith get out of the car first. They followed one of the ushers into the White House and over to the Diplomatic Reception Room. When they entered, they greeted many familiar faces.

Jeffrey Norwalk, still President for the next couple of hours, came over to greet them.

He did not even give Chloe or Meredith a kiss on the cheek, but merely shook their hands. After a few pleasantries, the women drifted over to people they knew and Tiller moved close to Norwalk.

"That was a pretty neat trick you pulled off with Matt Hawkins, Jeff."

"You think so, Russ," Norwalk smiled. "When I first came up with the idea, I thought of you." Norwalk would never reveal to Tiller that

the idea had actually come from Lamar Perryman, the supposedly loyal Democratic Speaker of the House.

“It caught everybody by surprise,” said Tiller.

“Certainly Thurston,” Norwalk said with an arched eyebrow.

“And a few other people,” said Tiller.

Norwalk stepped away when someone called him and Tiller made his way over to Hawkins, who was strangely alone in a corner. Tiller noticed that half the people in the room looked at Hawkins as if he were some sort of pariah, and of course he was if you happened to be a Democrat. But here he was in a sea of Republicans. Showing that he was a consummate player, Tiller strode over to Hawkins and held out his hand. They shook.

“Mr. President, very nice to see you again.”

“You’re quite the topic of conversation, aren’t you?”

“I guess you could say that, Mr. President,” said Hawkins with a smile. “But the heat has started to cool off. I’m hoping the focus shifts to St. Clair and the media leave me alone. At least you’re not afraid to talk to me.”

“As I recall, the last time we chatted, you told me you were going to vote for Thurston.”

“A man can always change his mind,” said Hawkins. “You’ve done it a few times yourself, Mr. President.”

“Well put, Matt. Well put. I think you can count on the American public to have a short memory, Senator,” said Tiller.

“I’m counting on it,” laughed Hawkins. “I will prove myself to my constituents. I’ll make them proud of me.”

“Spoken like a 29-year-old,” said Tiller.

Pat Vaughan came over carrying two cups of coffee. She handed one to Hawkins.

“Hello, Mr. President,” she said with a big smile.

“Why, Pat! How are you?”

He gave her a kiss.

"I'm fine," she said, looking with adoration at the handsome Matt Hawkins.

Tiller smiled and shook his head.

"And here you are with a Democrat!"

"Who voted for a Republican," she pointed out, looking across the room at President-elect Sam Houston St. Clair.

"Politics makes strange bedfellows," said Tiller. "Now I know it's true."

"We're very happy, Mr. President," said Hawkins.

"I can see that," said Tiller. "I hope it lasts."

"It'll last," said Hawkins, a little more defiantly than he had to, thought Tiller.

"Well," said Tiller, looking at his watch and taking a cup of coffee from a tray passed by a waiter. "It's almost time to swear in a new President. Here's to the next four years!"

## Chapter 33

*January 20 – 1:10 P.M.*

Freeman got up and flung his topcoat over his shoulders. His injuries made everything so fucking awkward, he thought.

He passed by the break room at the end of the hall by the elevators and peeked in. A couple of dozen cops were gathered around a TV mounted on the wall looking at the Inaugural coverage.

“Any wise words from the new President?” he asked.

“Like you’d listen to ’em anyway,” snapped one detective with a laugh.

Downstairs in the garage, he got into his unmarked green fucking Ford. Driving wasn’t really so difficult, once you got the gear into drive.

The heater was on high, but the car got stuffy fast, so he cracked the window with his left arm, holding the bottom of the steering wheel delicately with the fingers of his right hand. He drove slowly down to Patricia’s. It was freezing cold out, but the bracing fresh air felt good coming through the four-inch crack he had in the window.

It had been a quiet drive down, until his cell phone rang. He saw it was Rafaela Salguero.

He was glad to hear from her.

“Hey, you Cuban sexpot, what’s going on?”

“*Amos!*” Salguero said breathlessly, “*Amos—*”

“*What?*”

“You better get down to Patricia McTaggart’s house—right away.”

A sickening panic spread through his chest and into his neck.

“*What happened, Rafa, what happened?*”

“There’s a homicide call, a homicide call, Amos. It’s Patricia McTaggart. A neighbor called it in.”

His eyes went wide.

“A neighbor, a neighbor,” he mumbled. “*Patricia, the kids—Rafa—what about the boys?*”

“I don’t know, I just got the call. I’m on my way.”

He switched off and hit the floorboard.

\* \* \*

Freeman wasn’t the first one there, by any means. There were already ten cars and trucks in the quaint side street by the time he pulled up. If Patricia was truly dead, all he could think about was the boys.

He got out of the car and raced into the building, nodding to the uniformed officers as he passed.

He was afraid to think straight, he was afraid to *think* at all. He instinctively knew that he had better be ready to *react*, but not to think anything. He might crack apart into a million little pieces if he tried to absorb rationally anything that was happening. He knew he had to see whatever was waiting for him before he could think about it.

As he came in through the apartment door, the cops and crime scene people blurred into the periphery. There was a familiar smell he picked up instantly as he entered the living room: blood. There was a group of people in the kitchen. He went in after them, trying to compose himself and somehow remember that he was Detective Lieutenant Amos Freeman of the 28th Precinct, Homicide Division/South.

So he went into the kitchen and saw her.

He’d already prepared himself. He’d known what to expect. And knowing what she might possibly look like, he would now be able to avoid vomiting all over the kitchen. He could in a strange way be calmer now, knowing in advance what she would look like.

There’s not much tougher and hardened a group as New York Police Department crime scene specialists—but they suddenly became

quiet as Freeman moved through them to the still untouched body of Patricia McTaggart.

He knelt silently beside her.

*And cried.*

Big, heaving, sobbing cries. Cries from the bottom of his gut, the deeper reaches of his soul. Cries for himself as much as her. Cries for the—

—*BOYS!*

Snap!

*“Where are the boys?”*

Sergeant Mike Harris came up.

“Apartment next door, Lieutenant. Little Speedy found the body, called it in like a real cop. But they didn’t believe ’im. He went and got the neighbor, who called it in again.” Harris’s eyes were moist. “I just can’t believe this.”

Freeman made his way out of the kitchen, into the hall and down to the next apartment where some cops were guarding the door. They moved aside for him and he went in and found the boys, sequestered in a bedroom with a police counselor and Rafa, who was holding the boys in her arms, his eyes wet with tears.

The boys were numb with shock; they’d been crying, but now had stopped as they responded to Rafa’s soothing urges.

“Amos,” she bleated.

Then the boys saw Freeman, and they both dashed off the bed and ran towards him. Freeman fell to his knees, slipped his bad arm painfully out of the sling, and scooped both of them up in his arms.

And the crying began all over again, as he knew it would and as he knew it had to. He kissed them on their wet eyes, each one after the other as each of his hands stroked the hair on their heads.

“It’s all right. You’re going to come stay with me. Me and Angie. You’ll be all right. I won’t let them hurt you. *I promise, I promise! I promise!*”

After a half hour with Speedy and Pat, Freeman left the boys with Rafa and went back into the hallway, back into the kitchen, and knelt beside Patricia. If she'd had any face left, he'd have kissed her. As it was, he leaned down and took up her hand, kissing her palm. Then he laid it down and went into the living room and sat down, burying his face in his one good hand. The sling hung limp around his neck.

He finally regained his composure and got up the strength to look at Patricia's mother's body.

Then there were the hours of investigation, paperwork and arrangements to be made so that he could take the two boys home—at least temporarily. Patricia's mother had been a widow and John's parents had been dead for years. There was no one else. Freeman kept insisting on the temporary nature of the arrangements to get by the state counselors that came to the scene in situations like this, but in the end, Mayor Lindstadt intervened personally and he prevailed. He and Rafa got the kids back to his house.

After speaking the next day directly with the mayor, Freeman took the next three days off to spend entirely with the kids. He also needed the time to think things through.

\* \* \*

Four days later, Freeman met Rafaela Salguero at Big Dot's around 6 P.M. to drink and talk before going off to another Latin dinner.

"But *who* would do it?" she demanded, shaking her head.

"Damned if I know why, but I know who."

"The church robbers?"

"Who else?"

"But *why*?"

Freeman shrugged.

"A warning? To me? I don't know. I've been thinking about it."

“But why would they kill John McTaggart’s *wife* to warn *you*?” Rafaela asked, her voice a mixture of shock and bewilderment. “She’s nothing to you—not like your old partner, for Christ’s sake.”

“No,” Freeman said quietly. “It’s not like she was my partner or anything. Just my partner’s *wife*.”

Freeman raised his shoulders in a shrug.

“I just can’t believe anybody would do something like this for no reason. It doesn’t make any sense,” Big Dot said.

*It does to me*, thought Freeman. The people who killed Patricia and her mother *had to know* he was seeing her all the time, staying the night sometimes, sleeping with her. They *had to know* she meant something to him. Something more than Rafaela or anybody else would ever know now that she was dead.

*Which means they’ve been watching me!*

He already knew someone was watching him—or else there wouldn’t have been the hit at Big Dot’s. They’d known that was his hang-out.

But it was obvious now they’d been watching him much more closely than he’d ever imagined—and he’d had no idea all along, had seen nothing to give the tail away, nothing suspicious, no single car day after day behind him, no single person he could remember having seen two consecutive days.

There wasn’t even a strong *point* to the whole God damned thing.

*What was the point?*

What was the motive for killing Patricia? To kill the one person he felt really close to emotionally? It gnawed at him.

Did they think they could scare him? Scare him away?

*Him?*

*Amos Freeman?*

*They may have been watching me*, he thought, *but they don’t know me.*

*They don’t know shit!*

He and Rafaela went off to dinner at La Paella over in the East Village between Second and Third. The place, always crowded, was busier than usual, and Freeman liked it that way. He and Rafaela had to sit side by side, on a banquette, so their thighs touched during the entire meal.

He ordered a bottle of \$75 Rioja and the paella in the Basque style they both liked: an enormous bed of saffron rice topped with spicy chorizo, chicken, shrimp, mussels, clams and squid. They started with some ham and cheese croquettes that melted in your mouth.

"Somebody told me it was impossible for you to be half Cuban and half Salvadoran."

"Why?"

"Because they don't get along."

"Well, my parents got along okay. They met in Miami. One left a revolution in Cuba, the other a revolution in El Salvador."

"Well, *viva la fuckin' revolución*," Freeman piped in, "as long as it produces pretty girls like you," he winked.

Rafa paused, looking at him digging into the pungent paella.

"You'll have to come with me to Miami sometime. Meet my folks. See South Beach. We'd have a blast."

"I've been to South Beach."

"Not with me, you haven't."

When Rafa ordered the second bottle of Rioja, with just about the cutest smile you could imagine, Freeman could pretty well see where the night was going.

For dessert, they ordered the *tarta de manzana*, an apple tart with vanilla ice cream.

When they went out onto East Ninth Street (it was only 9 P.M.), he took her by the arm, turned her gently and kissed her on the mouth.

"Let's go to my place," she offered.

"I'd like that," was all he said, and after the short drive up Third Avenue to her studio in Murray Hill, they were naked and grunting like pigs, she releasing the pent-up desire she'd had for a year or more since

the last time she made love to Freeman, and he releasing the tension and desire he felt for Patricia McTaggart.

By 11, he felt like he'd had some kind of mental and physical cleansing, and for the moment, he was relaxed, refreshed, rejuvenated and blissfully emptied of all emotion.

*Just what the doctor ordered*, he thought contentedly as Rafa rested her head on his chest and breathed deeply. He stroked Rafa's matted silky black hair, luminous in the half-light of an ancient lava lamp, with blue metallic blobs moving up and down the oblong glass.

"You and that stupid lava lamp," he smiled.

"Hey, that's my *lucky* lava lamp."

He made a move to leave, and she pulled him back.

He leaned down and kissed her lightly on the eyes, the forehead, the lips.

"I want to get back to put the kids to bed, Rafa. You understand."

She smiled and nodded.

"Go, then. The boys are more important, anytime. I wish I could go with you."

"I wish you could, too," he said, thinking of Angie and how ill equipped she was to deal with the twins. Thank God his mother was there.

When he got out onto the corner of Third Avenue and Thirty-eighth Street, he hailed a cab (they'd taken her car from the Jungle Bar) and went back to Big Dot's. He hadn't told Rafa his mother already would have put the boys to bed.

\* \* \*

"Hey," said Big Dot in the usual way. "How was dinner?"

"Oh, good. Great, even. It's that Spanish sausage, that chorizo. Really gives the paella a kick, ya know?"

"I don't eat that Spanish shit."

"Well..."

"You know, that girl's still got the hots for you, Freeman."

"Ya think?" was all he could say.

He threw off his topcoat onto the stool next to him. There wasn't anyone else in the bar.

Which was just as good.

Big Dot brought out Freeman's bottle of Black Jack and poured a double shot for him. And then one for herself.

"You're never gonna get out of this sinkhole, you know that?" Freeman smiled sadly.

"And why's that?"

"You drink on the job, that's why."

When he left Big Dot's, he took care to look both ways when he came out. And he had his gun in his good hand, just in case these smartasses thought Freeman was the kind who figured lightning never struck twice in the same place.

He was tired now.

The drive home was torture. When he finally got into his own living room, Angie and her folks were waiting for him.

He and Angie got into bed without a word. Just before she turned off the lights, Angie leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"You've got to catch these guys, Amos."

"I know." He paused and looked at her. "I'll get them. Somehow. I'll get them."

Though he was whipped after all that happened that afternoon and night, and after drinking at Big Dot's, and making love to sweet Rafaela, he was still wide awake after Angie's regular deep breathing told him he was sound asleep.

The tears welled up in him.

He wanted to cry.

Cry for Patricia. And by crying bring out the genuine and selfish sorrow he felt for himself now that he had to live without her.

And so he cried.

But for the last time. He told himself this would be *the last time* he cried.

He wouldn't let himself cry again. Ever again. He knew that. His mind was off that now. And thinking about the investigation. The facts. The lack of decent motherfucking clues. Jimmy Simon. Charlie Kol-snar. The bonds. Gerard, Nugent & Co., Randolph Gerard, Emory Parkhurst, Janie Parkhurst, the Reverend Richard Whitney, Trinity Church. Deputy Mayor Marlton, Fatty Fowler.

And the midnight mass that had brought more anguish into his life than he ever—*ever*—could have imagined.

*29 March 2015  
Black Kitty Cottage  
South Beach*

**Continued in...**  
**MIDNIGHT MASS**  
The Break

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## Jack Houston

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Jack

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Jonathan Vaughan and his boyfriend Rolando

Belinda Vaughan

Eve Harrington and her mother Maggie

Vlad Kucherov and Wilma Kassman

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