

Living Stones Pentecostal Church
1151 North Highland Avenue, NE
Midtown Atlanta

9:30 P.M.

Anastasiya imagined the congregational roar “as the sound of many waters” from the Book of Revelation and the millions who died in Stalin’s Great Purge in 1930’s Soviet Union. Not that she knew about the latter. She was not in mother's thoughts yet. Her grandmother, Natalia Prinkolova, God rested her soul, told tales of horror from pre-World War II dictator’s reign as ‘Man of Steel’. She imagined countless families who wept and could do little else to help loved ones. She recently came to know Jehovah as God of love and mercy. She long since knew no such thing existed in former Soviet Union. Ex

The predominately Caucasian mass choir of about sixty men and mostly women arrayed themselves in silk red robes with black and white trim along the sleeves. Amidst the wooden pews, the choir led sitting and standing worshipers to fill the upper and lower level sanctuary with vocals and hands lifted in praises to God. Those hands included her French Manicured ones. She was amongst an estimated 5,000 in attendance at one of Metro Atlanta’s Mega-Churches during the first Sunday service of the month, which designated the Holy Communion ceremonies. That was morning service.

Due to Georgia’s summer swelter her tanned winter, soft, smooth and light bronze skin often prompted members to remark she should be in pictures. Hollywood or Madison Avenue? Both far cry from Mother Russia and the winter winds that whistled Siberian Dixie.

She wore a vanilla silk scarf over her straight and thick shoulder length brunette hair, a silk yellow button down blouse, blue slacks with a whip thin blue leather belt to keep them up and strapped, yellow open-toed Donna Karan’s exposed her French Pedicure. At times, she felt the lusty eyes of men and jealous eyes of women. If they had a problem with her, it was their problem. God loved her as she was, He loved them as they were and that she learned was unconditional love.

Services ended, she was not ready for home. What opportunities America had to offer the world! When she was adolescent in Soviet Union, she hid with others in basements or the woods to pray and to worship God. If the government knew, jail soon followed. Like Martin Luther King said, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty we're free at last!" She praised God for freedom and shouted at the top of voice. Many other Russian Pentecostal immigrants rushed into America before and after Soviet Union fell and left with all but clothes on back. Oh, and the children! There was no American law that forbade children under eighteen to attend church! She knew of several families threatened by government phone calls not to take adolescent to church but here much adolescent everywhere at Pentecostal Church. One day she delivered a baby who was free to worship God and him or her too everywhere at Living Stones Pentecostal Church.

She smiled through tears that flowed over her eyes' rims, onto her cheeks and down each side of her chin. With bowed head and interlocked fingers and hands, she thanked God for her new life in America and even Atlanta's cool December winter air.

Out in lobby areas after services, she still had not decided where to finish the night before she went home. Then she remembered a small all-night diner on Virginia Avenue or was it Ponce De Leon Avenue? Well, but one way to know for sure. The only disappointment about tonight, if she were so bold before God, was no one to share His presence with her...not yet. Like movie trailers said, "Coming Soon".

She greeted those who looked her way and asked God to enable her to greet those who did not look her way too. She missed Svetlana, one of her best friends. They usually sat together to worship when she was not busy, but she decided to be homebody tonight. However, she saw other Russian immigrants. She engaged in small talk with them. They talked mostly about God and new opportunity in this country. After some hour and a half passed, she decided time to go too.

She stepped through the multiple glass double doors with church address, phone number, cross, dove insignias on all of them, and out into the night. This was Georgia winter, but not Russian Georgia winter, she chuckled to self.

The last congregante in the church parking lot, she deep breathed the night air, closed her eyes and smiled. She entered her pearl white Jaguar XJ8 in a far corner space immersed in darkness, gripped the steering wheel and again and again thanked God for a new life. She promised God to be as the Bible said, "a vessel unto honour..." and "meet for the master's use". She devoted herself to America's Christianity as she had to Soviet Union's Communism. Like professional sports, she was traded to a new team; a better team too. She vowed to help whomever she could help, whenever she could help and in any way she could help.

She inserted the key and started the Jaguar when a hand pounded on her driver side window. Wide eyed with mouth agape, she jerked her upper body sideways toward the passenger seat with hands before her face in a defensive posture. She viewed an elderly white woman who smiled through tar and nicotine stained teeth. Anastasiya saw she held an unlit cigarette in one hand and looked for her to fill the other one. The elderly woman motioned for her to roll the window down. Still a bit shaky, Anastasiya acquiesced. The mature woman stuck her face inside the car close enough to bang heads. That forced Anastasiya to revert in defense once more.

"Be a dear and gimme some cigarettes."

"I do not have a cigarette and you now have one in hand."

"This ol' thing? Yeah, but I ain't got no more and a pretty girl like you in this car can get whatever you want. I think it's called sophistication."

That butter teeth stained smile beamed as she stroked her stringy and unkempt blonde hair that simultaneously pointed in all directions.

Anastasiya frowned from the repulsive smoker's breath. Had not thought even been one minute from her head when this woman appeared? God tested her or the devil himself. She made a vow and had to fulfill it. She knew smoking killed body, it was the temple of the Lord. But she vowed to help whomever she could help though peace left if she gave her money for cigarettes. As preacher taught people, her heart was umpire of peace and she called this vow of help, out, not safe. She had idea much better—

"C'mon, sweetie, mama's got withdrawals to calm down! I can smoke 'em out or trade 'em in for a little rustle in the hay with a boy toy if ya' know what I mean."

The old woman thrust both arms into the car for Anastasiya's purse. The Jaguar owner fought off one hand and arm, which found her change purse, but used her own hand and arm to grasp a Walther P22 pistol. The beggar's fear filled brown eyes said as much as her retracted arms and hands positioned in defense before her haggard face.

"Oh God, if you're in the parkin' lot, help me!"

Just then, from the church's parking lot shadows to the left of the scene, a silver-blue Chevrolet Astro van slowed its actions as silhouetted figures watched. The passenger side window powered down and a man yelled.

"Hey, you all right?"

Anastasiya's other hand clutched some folded paper she extended to the woman, grabbed one of the beggar's hands and pulled her toward the car.

"Help me somebody! She got a gun!"

With that, the passenger side man flung his door open. His curiosity energized every cautious step toward the pair.

"Stop! We end this now. Take this! It is money!"

She lied and asked God for forgiveness at the same time. The next instant two bangs echoed and the elderly woman fell at the Jaguar's driver side door. The spectator hit the pavement and covered his head. Terrified, Anastasiya wondered what just happened. How did this come to this? She strived to open her door to check for life, but the weight of the woman blocked her inside. No! She needed to go! God will bless this woman as He saw fit. She did not want to be recognized. She trembled to think...no, no, she was safe here in America, but she must go home now!

She attempted to slam the luxury vehicle in to drive to speed out of the parking lot. The man picked himself up off the pavement as the van sped and stopped in front of the Jaguar. Her getaway was blocked. Her panic heightened further, the man pointed at her through the front windshield and yelled:

"Don't shoot!" Man One said.

The driver side door flew open and out popped Man Two. The passenger side man checked on the old woman.

"Yeah, we just want to help you!" Man Two said. "Where's the gun?"

"She's dead. I ain't never seen a dead..."

Man Two jerked the driver side door open while Man One did the same to the passenger side. Man Two pulled her out of the car as Anastasiya screamed. She reached for her P22 when Man One sat in the passenger seat, turned off the car, grasped her purse and keys and exited the opposite side. Man Two continued his verbal assault:

"We both saw you lady! Where's the gun?"

"I—"

"I my eye."

"I got the gun!" Man One said.

"Where do I go with you?"

"To the police," Man Two said.

"No, no, I cannot go to the police—"

"Sweetheart, you don't have a choice."

Man Two dragged her to the late nineties model van. They slid the door open and Man Two flung her inside. Man One ran around to the driver side of the van.

"What about the old lady?" Man One asked.

Man Two, seated next to her in the back seats, whipped out a cell phone and dialed.

"We leave her where she is as proof of the murder—yes ma'am, I'd like to report a shooting and I have the shooter...Yes ma'am, I'm making a citizen's arrest—"

"Arrest! Oh, no! You do not understand—"

"I have the shooter...Yes, I repeat, I have the shooter next to me right now. I'll bring her to police headquarters now—"

"Jesus! No, please let me go—"

"We're only minutes away on North Highland Avenue. Okay...No, thank you."

"You do not understand. I cannot go to prison—"

Man One addressed her. "I can tell by your accent you're not from this country, but you can't shoot someone and drive off, miss!"

The van cranked, Man One pulled out, checked the traffic flow and prepared to turn right onto North Highland Avenue. Anastasiya caught a quick glimpse through the van's back door windows at the shadowy outlines of her car and the still body of the old woman. She was... Then that same vision caught something else: Someone stepped out of the church's rear doors. She recognized him as Senior Pastor James Rowdington. Her last and sole hope never saw her.

Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport
6000 North Terminal Parkway
Atlanta, GA
12:15 A.M.

The long flight on Lufthansa German Airlines for the crew of men that ranged in height from five foot ten to six foot three left them irritated. They all could pass for National Football League players and their demeanor produced edginess. The waist length black leather jackets and the dark, partially opened knee length London Fog overcoats draped them all. Other items in common: Rolex watches, 24-karat gold chains around 20"-22" necks and gold rings on bratwurst sized fingers that reflected off various airport road streetlights and defied anyone to try to steal them.

In unison, they all exited Concourse E or the International Terminal at the busiest airport in the world. In moments, the fivesome boarded a sleek and black as night Cadillac Escalade along Aviation Boulevard. Then the Sports Utility Vehicle turned left onto Airport Loop Road and skirted the outer perimeter of the Clayton County facility of air transport.

Within minutes and in somewhat light traffic, the SUV meandered its way onto Interstate 85 Northbound whose surfaces split the mostly African-American adjacent cities of College Park, East Point, Hapeville and the capital city itself, Atlanta.

The driver was a brunette hair man with brown skin dressed in a brown leather jacket and like colored khaki pants. A like complected, except for a full lip mustache, front seat passenger stared out the windshield. Both remained focused upon the road and its blurred stationary sentries called streetlights, directional signs and multipurpose buildings. The other road warriors that shared the late night excursion zoomed past the Cadillac that cruised at 40 mph and reached its stride at a modest 50-55.

As quiet as they were, the rear passengers took that stealth to another level. Pages turned in five manila folders under the illumination of various styled flashlights. Housed inside the information packets were colored photographs, diagrams, maps and surveillance photographs of Hartsfield-Jackson, downtown Atlanta and its city landmarks.

Interstate 85 North merged with Interstate 75 North and guided the SUV's occupants into the city of Atlanta. The Escalade passed another of I-75/85's highway brethren, Interstate 20 East/West, among the lit downtown skyscrapers. The SUV's right turn signal blinked and the driver took the Peachtree Street/Pine Street exit. As the SUV veered right to travel south onto downtown Atlanta's main artery that was Peachtree, through the back windows the visitors studied the infrastructure of commerce generated from grand hotels and corporate buildings. About ten to fifteen minutes later, the driver slowed the vehicle's velocity from thirty to fifteen mph surrounded by other driving and walking night owls.

"To the left, Nikita."

The five furrowed their brows and foreheads at the gray stone/cement and glass building that from the front appeared as if it possessed the makings of half an octagonal shape. More importantly, the thick bullet-shaped and similar to the building colored marquee erected along the sidewalk several feet before the gray stone/cement steps that lead into the facility read in large, white capital letters, "ATLANTA CITY DETENTION CENTER". The two men up front stole glances at the five silent partners. Now all of their heads dipped again into the like numbered manila folders. The *Atlanta Daily Post* (ADP) clippings, the city's major newspaper, reported on another five person team that made the state's capital their professional abode they were sure would have to be dealt with sooner than later.

However, Nikita Cherinko needed not to re-cap adversaries. He spent day and night planning possible meeting with Atlanta Homicide Detectives whose moniker, 'The X-Men', delineated targets to put second succession of bullets. It not necessary, Nikita thought, but if so, only business not personal.

Ironman Fitness Center
75 5th Street, NW
Midtown Atlanta
6:00 A.M.

Rock & Roll music blared with the aerobics classes participants' feet that stomped in four glass-enclosed rooms filled to capacity in the upper floor exercise areas. Nearby amid the polished chrome rails that encompassed the expansive spaces rested Stairmasters, elliptical bikes and treadmills that availed themselves to weight loss, muscle definition and cardiovascular health.

Meantime, grunts and groans wafted in the floor level area below known as, 'The Dungeon'. Every manner of exercise equipment stamped with brand names *Hammer Strength*, *Cybex* and *Magnum* worked the specific body part intended by its user. It was here that those whose goals centered on building body mass as large as possible plied their trade. *Standard* and *Ivanko* barbells, dumbbells and weighted plates clanged in strained efforts by their masters hoisted in vertical and horizontal planes with ferocious power, strength and relentless intensity.

Homicide Sergeant Malcolm Xavier Hobbs altered his chest workout every Tuesday to keep his pectorals off-balance and spurred them to higher levels of growth. He commenced with Incline Barbell Presses for his upper chest. He used the Pyramid System and started from 135 pounds for fifteen repetitions to 315 pounds for a hard but spotter free six reps that probably put his one repetition maximum somewhere around 375 pounds. His black and yellow Gold's Gym tank top covered his sweat soaked chest that flushed with excess blood and produced a nice tight pump.

After a couple of minutes rest, he strapped a dip belt about his waist with an additional forty-five pounds that hung between his legs. He stepped up to the dip/leg raise station, pushed himself up via shoulder and triceps power, leaned forward as his chin touched his chest and exploded up and down for a successful ten rep set. Less than a handful of minutes in recovery, he increased the poundage to seventy and cranked out another ten rep set.

Unhitched from the belt that rested on the floor, he walked about to catch his breath cognizant both visually and with nasal passages of the other early A.M. bodybuilders' and powerlifters' Herculean efforts this morning. He sported two-hundred pounds of dense muscle on a six-foot coffee with cream African-American complexioned frame.

Malcolm exhaled. He felt good at the weight, but another 25 pounds of mass sounded great too. If, no when, he reached his two hundred and twenty five pound goal, he'd start his pre-contest diet for the light-heavyweight National Physique Committee (NPC) Atlanta Bodybuilding Championships in April or the NPC Eastern Seaboard Championships in May. Only problem, if called that, was he won both contests three years ago. So what was the point of reentry? He seldom competed since and he anticipated the familiar territory's probable relaxed effects. He also knew if he competed again it might displace the heinous acts of the Gangsta' 40 or G-40 Posse members.

As anger arose from his soul's depths, he shook his head and ran his hands through his short-cropped wavy black hair. He bent down to the weight belt, unhooked one metal loop of the leather belt and removed the forty-five and twenty-five pound plates. In their places, he rolled a colossal 100-pound plate. He hitched the belt together again and recalled in vivid detail the smell of Giorgio Red and repugnant Uzi gunpowder. He growled in fury as he hopped up on the dip/leg raise apparatus, dipped to the floor with his legs bent behind him and powered upward. He finished one arduous rep after another and exerted maximum force to complete the final three. However, he failed to block the images of slaughter in his mind. Unanticipated footsteps ran toward Malcolm from the left.

"Come on, push it up there, baby! Push it! Don't you wanna be the next NPC Georgia State Light-Heavyweight Champion next summer? Don't quit! Jack that weight up, brotha!"

Malcolm spied Homicide Detective Orlando Queen in a dark blue World Gym tank top and matched sweatpants with the name and insignia of the world in yellow on the right thigh near the crotch. He hunched near Malcolm who struggled to complete rep ten. The bald headed, fudge brownie skinned, full-lip black mustache detective and five year veteran of ATL homicide investigations clapped his hands in encouragement.

About five feet-ten inches tall and one-hundred and seventy-five pounds, Malcolm knew Orlando was marked on the street as a no nonsense cop. His reputation as a street thug, shoot first and ask questions later suspect abuser with a badge, reached his ears more than once. He gave his detective the benefit of just his doubt since others on his own team especially Selena, readily confirmed it. Nevertheless, he was one of the best detectives he'd ever worked alongside and valued his keen insight to create 'What If?' scenarios to track criminal M.O. and psychology. However, word from Chief Harriet Davis came down to keep Queen in line before Internal Affairs or Office of Professional Standards (OPS) investigated. Orlando challenged the breach of the 'true-blue' code of cops that stuck together through thick and thin. It was past time for a talk with him and it would occur very soon. Like right now.

"Lockout at the top, dog! Push it! Push it! I ain't helpin' ya'!"

He rested his arms against his chest and tapped a foot in mocked impatience.

Orlando smiled when Malcolm finished the tenth rep and the set. He unfastened the belt and eased it to the floor as much sweat poured down his face and shortness of breath defied his desire for a calmer heart rate. He glanced around first and then closed the gap.

"You see a dog, check to see if it has a leash and return it to its rightful owner. I'm a man, got it?"

"Whew! Got it, will hold on to it and won't ever let it go. Little chilly in here this Bob Ross mornin'. Did you wake up with the raw meat hangin' out the side of your mouth?" Nothing. "Any who, watchin' you made me tired and pumped me up at the same time."

"Speaking of time, why are you late?"

"Expellin' a hanger on out my crib, bro'. Sometimes I'm so good I wish I could step outside my body and just watch myself work it. Like God restin' on the seventh day and admirin' all of His creation, dig?"

"Yeah, you six feet under when you catch the right woman on the wrong night...or morning."

"Hey my brother, I am a master at the peak of his prowess. She'll be back. They always come back."

"Like Selena?"

Orlando's braggadocio disintegrated. Malcolm wanted to bite his tongue, but his current mindset allowed the slippage. Maybe it wasn't by accident, either. Face it, his detective's lateness was only a shadow for the real object of this morning's touchiness. He should apologize, but bump it. It was out there, so whatever. He focused back onto his detective.

"Is she all right?"

"Far as I know."

"How far is that?"

Orlando tilted his head up and squinted at him.

"Meanin' what, Malcolm?"

"We both know what that means."

"Well, if the sun rose in the west and settled in the east, it would be my world, I would be God and I could manipulate things anyway I wanted. But I can't."

"So, you're completely over her then?"

"I'm completely over the fact that I can't have her right now."

"Hope springs eternally?"

"I'm at my best when I break and solve a case and when I break and solve a woman."

Malcolm raised his eyebrows on that one. Orlando changed nothing.

"If you've done the deductions, right now I'm not very happy. I think she still has feelings for Ernest Brown."

Malcolm leaned toward him. "I hope that your breaking doesn't pertain to suspects' heads."

"Oh, okay. Now I know where this is going. That Foster thing is a trumped-up charge, Malcolm. How long have you been hearin' about me roughin' up perps, huh?"

"Too long. I'm tired of hearing the innuendoes."

"Well I'm tired of the accusations and try provin' any of them. I do my job with more than a smidgen of restraint. I'm rough-and-tumble when I need to be."

Malcolm pressed his eyebrows in a sternness that startled his detective. He whispered.

"Administrative leave under any circumstance is tough to take particularly when a cop is charged for police brutality. You want that stigma forever?"

"Are you gonna perpetuate it?"

"If Brown's a threat to Selena, will you?"

Malcolm stared at a taken aback and in disbelief Orlando, but the subordinate understood the inference. If he caught wind of any shakedown in that area, he'd have Detective Queen's badge. It's said the truth hurts and his last statements KO'd Orlando. As his superior officer, he had a duty to enforce order with his detectives even off the clock.

"Selena's water over and under the bridge which is a flood. The bridge has collapsed and destroyed. I.E., there's nothing left but acceptance that it happened. End of story."

"Is it?"

"I said something to that effect about Lynette I don't suppose you'd be pop and lockin' about right now either."

Ouch. Okay, he deserved that, Malcolm opined. He gazed at him. He sensed the reflected remorse that matched his own. Orlando was a big boy though...and he was late. He began anew and that included any conversations, regardless of the temperament, about that day. Here began the lessons of his new philosophies he'd simply titled: 'Life Without Lynette'.

"Orlando, "what has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." My chest is tight and right. Shall we work calves?"

With that, Malcolm split for the Standing Calf Raise machine a short distance. As he passed Orlando, the Homicide Detective, as a rule never at a loss for words, turned and followed in his wake. Checkmate, Detective Queen, sir.

**Starbucks Coffee House
3500 Peachtree Road, NE
Atlanta**

7:30 A.M.

Typical Atlanta gridlock commuter traffic, Omar thought as he sat at a table inside the coffee house. This stretch of Buckhead was always crammed with retail and restaurant commerce on both sides of Peachtree. Lenox Mall and Phipps Plaza were down the road too. He shared an internal laugh at the oxymoronic rush hour in which no one went anywhere fast.

Americans. So much power and potential for good, but they and their government were selfish. A nation of 300 million sable rattlers wreaked havoc on the entire world in particular his Middle East. Behind his sunglasses, he studied drivers, walkers and bicyclists while he sipped a cappuccino. The supposed good by the United States in some respects reflected the same questionable good in his homeland.

The Kingdom, the Royal Family and the capital city of Riyadh. Why had his beloved country clung so close to these blue-eyed devils? It was simple. Oil. Oil sustained the strained alliance between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia for years and years. Saudi Arabia controlled the world's largest supply of oil and Washington would do nothing to destroy that link.

What strained alliance? Radical Islam. That was what Omar liked most, the straining. Americans have seen nothing yet. The White House planned defenses, but Islam planned more and better offenses. Just a matter of time before the red, white and blue ignited with fires of wholesale destruction. Biological, chemical, dirty bomb or nuclear made no difference to him.

As he sipped the cappuccino again, disdain pulsated beneath his windbreaker and blue jean covered exterior. Consensus communications back home was enough on 9/11. Conspiracy theories abound that the Israeli Mossad or U.S. government agency planned the attack with Saudi's citizenry mere pawns. What he and other Arabians shared with Americans was the business of day-to-day life. In other words, al-Qaeda who?

He read the reports of American troops on Saudi soil that battled extremist forces soon after 9/11 and the native government arrested a couple handfuls of al-Qaeda members for a plot to use Russian manufactured surface-to-air missiles to shoot down U.S. jets. He prayed to Allah each day that his country's imams continued the condemnation of America during prayer. Billions of dollars from wealthy Saudis established radical Islamic militant schools worldwide that included the madrasahs in Pakistan, which produced the beloved Taliban fighters. He swore he smelled the American stench from their oldest strategic partner in the Arab world and his homeland, which used the U.S. military to protect itself against Saddam Hussein in Gulf War I until today.

Brakes squealed, horns honked and engines revved. All of it reminded Omar of home. His country was the biggest market for U.S. consumer products in all the Middle East. The cars, brand name goods and TV programs. All the "best things in life", yet younger Saudis wanted more. Wahhabism was the answer. Young Saudis needed to focus on the bigger picture: To defeat the West and to spread Radical Islam all over the world.

Despite hundreds of al-Qaeda members arrested since 9/11 in The Kingdom and much reluctance of the Saudi officials to cut off colossal sums of money to al-Qaeda, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Omar knew that anytime anyone questioned his government about reformed policies, they refused to budge. That, kept Washington quiet and that, was part of strained alliance.

Like it or not, Saudi Arabia was what it was and that was a two-faced regime that played the U.S. and the rest of the West against a facade of the War On Terror. To his way of thought, that suited his plans just fine indeed.

**Atlanta Police Department
Homicide Headquarters
226 Peachtree Street, SW
Downtown Atlanta
8:05 A.M.**

I want some cooperation!”

“Sir, if you’ll please sit down someone will be along to help you—”

“I’ve heard that runaround for a half-hour now! Is there anyone here with any competence?”

“Again sir, please have a seat and an officer will be along to assist you.”

Dressed in Calvin Klein blue jeans and white short-sleeved polo shirt beneath a tan windbreaker, the slender white man in his late thirties stomped his way to a seat along the wall near the elevators. He crossed his legs and the suspended limb pounded the air in anger. A gorgeous, five-foot eight inch, reddish-brown like cinnamon skinned black female adjusted the holster about her twenty-eight inch waist and her attitude from the verbal onslaught aimed at her and her colleagues. Arrayed in brown slacks, a goldenrod blouse with Black Eye Susan prints and Nine West leopard low-heel open-toed pumps that exposed fuchsia tipped toenails, Homicide Detective Pepper Love asked the Holy Spirit to chill her out. Two wrong responses don’t make a right conclusion, she thought. Oh Father God, round two started anyway.

“Miss, excuse me. If you can’t help me let me talk to someone else who can, please!”

“I apologize for any inconveniences. I’m sure an officer will be available in a moment. In the meantime, if I can get the gist of what you needed—”

“I may have information on the ax victim!”

That cemented Pepper’s feet to the floor. Okay, that crime was how old and this man already possessed info’ on our early morning Dead Body? She cocked an eye of suspicion at him now. This potential perp ingratiated himself into the case and in the precinct no less. Talk about brazen. He might be an incognito TV or radio news reporter for the story scoop. She wasn’t sure of his motive, but she was sure she’d never seen him on any of the news broadcasts though the local crews’ personnel changed all the time and the authorities never asked her permission to hire or to fire anyone. Now, she decided to stay put until...

Malcolm stepped out of the elevator with a bang and a black, fine, soft fur felt fedora on his head. He wore a royal blue theme on his dress shirt, slacks, tie and Stacy Adams Wing Tips. He slipped his cell phone into a front pants pocket and his fedora off his head and into his hand.

Strapped in a cross body holster was his Smith & Wesson .40 caliber. Right away he was accosted by Pepper who he believed could've, should've and would've won Ms. America, Ms. USA, Ms. Universe and Ms. Black anything she entered if she desired or in her words "if God called her to pageantry." He glimpsed at her shoes and recalled she and Lynette bought a pair together in his first shopping mall trip with the duo at Southwest Atlanta or SWAT's African-American retail hub, Greenbriar Mall.

As Malcolm had seen in times past, her thick cinnamon shaded shoulder length hair set against the sun to the point it looked like her head smoldered. She was always the talk of the water coolers and the men's john. Unbeknownst to her, he defended her honor. The beauty of this woman of God snatched breaths away. The thirty-two year old detective possessed five years of Homicide experience, just over three with his unit. He always loved when she wore that fuchsia color which was on the northern and southern region of her two sets of nails. He remembered when she and Lynette came back from the nail salon together...it was one of Lynette's favorites too. He caught himself and shook his head to clear those thoughts. He added another component to his post-Lynette survival: Confessions.

"If I row the boat, I don't have any time to rock it."

Pepper wrinkled her nose at him, "Say what? Are you —"

"Ready to get to work? Yeah, what's up?"

"Okay. Walk with me a bit."

They stepped several feet away from the elevators. On the sly, she spotted the man over Malcolm's right shoulder. The stranger's sole intent lay in the interpretation of whatever it was the two of them discussed. The visitor stood a bit and walked a few paces toward them. Malcolm followed her crafty guidance as he scanned the precinct with erroneous apathy. He stepped a few more feet away from the man within the invisible barrier that blocked the visitor from the hub of the working facility where his brothers and sisters-in-blue started the first shift of the day about five minutes ago. This left the man on the outside in frustration. Malcolm stepped a few more feet toward various desks and their owners and listened to Pepper as she lowered her voice's volume.

"A DB in Midtown awaits our entree. Uni's have the area squared off and the M.E. and the ID Unit are doing what they do. I got the man behind us in near hysterics. He claims he knows something about the ax victim."

"Media, police scanner chaser or perp?"

"I'm with all of that Brother Malcolm. Eenie-Meenie-Miney-Mo, you pick one since I don't know. The bottom line? Only missing piece is Homicide."

"Shepard, Selena and Orlando are —"

"At their desks wondering if they're assigned to this case."

"Gotcha."

From the bowels of the Homicide Division's workplaces sauntered Detective Taylor Evans, a stocky mid-twenties black female. Malcolm addressed the stranger.

"Excuse me, sir."

"Finally someone who'll listen. I have—"

Malcolm's raised hand stopped him.

"Do me a favor and follow Detective Evans here and she'll assist you."

With a nod to her Sergeant, Detective Evans led the man to the rear of the offices. Malcolm picked up the conversation again.

"Only missing pieces are us. Let's roll."

**North Avenue Eastbound
Midtown Atlanta
8:15 A.M.**

Malcolm drove a white Ford Taurus, which was the vehicle of choice for the Homicide Division. Pepper sat on the other side and viewed the various streets that intersected to Ponce De Leon Avenue. He thought her too quiet. What was there to say anyway? After all, they were minutes away from a new homicide. Maybe he ought to speak. Why should he? An attempt to amend their breached relationship since he blamed her for Lynette's—blamed her for it. And what about his 'Life Without Lynette' strategy? That included letting bygones be bygones. Now, that sounded like a Pepper Love line for sure. Well, there was but one-way to find out—

“Cat got your tongue?”

Too late. He glanced at her.

“Nope. I contemplated the same with you. Of course, there's a time and a season for everything under the sun.”

“Can't deny that. But, is this the time and the season for whatever it is you want to release from your heart?”

Now she turned her head toward his, which remained focused upon the road ahead. He knew she was more spiritually sensitive than he was or in her words, more mature. Perhaps, just perhaps, she was right. He wasn't in competition with Pepper for the better Christian crown, but it irked him at times that as indirect as he purported to be, she managed to discern his heart. Something else she and Lynette shared. Well, that's scriptural too. “Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.” He thought upon that and from his heart or his soul or his flesh, something came up and out.

“...a time to die...a time to kill...a time to rend...a time to cast away stones...a time to hate; a time to war.” Her head never turned away from his own as she replied.

“...a time to heal...a time to build up...a time to mend...a time of peace...a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;...”

No, no, no. She tapped it again like always. His emotions stirred and he wouldn't allow it. So tell that to his still wounded heart because the tears built faster and faster. He wasn't to be outdone this time, Pepper Love.

“A time to search...a time to keep—”

“...a time to laugh...a time to dance...a time to give up...”

“No, no, I won't ever give up the search—search for the—why. “...a time to hate; a time of war...a time to kill...”

Pepper reached over and caressed his right forearm as it rested on his lap. Then she found his clenched hand and spoke with measured words.

“...a time to cast away...”

Malcolm’s decibels boomed. “No, no!”

She maintained her calmed tones and light grip of his fist.

“A time to plant...a time of peace...a time of love.”

His bottom lip quivered and his tears burst through his spirit and soul’s combined efforts to blockade them. This woman...this woman. He loved Pepper in Jesus’ Name, but liked her to undergo a near death experience. Well, that was a sure loss too since Jesus was just on the other side. He thanked God or better Satan for one thing, the crime scene.

Living Stones Pentecostal Church
1151 North Highland Avenue, NE
Midtown Atlanta
8:20 A.M.

Malcolm stopped the Taurus’ momentum in the church’s massive parking lot he guessed was several acres. He wiped his face with his hands. In his peripheral vision, Pepper duplicated his actions to her face with a Kleenex.

Then it dawned upon him where they were: At a church. He froze. Once more, he saw Pepper out of the corner of his eyes. She exhaled and stared out the front windshield at uniformed officers who penned statements from the citizenry. Patrol cars, ambulance and ID Unit trucks parked outside of the yellow with black letters crime scene tape, *Police Line Do Not Cross*, which cordoned off the ID Unit personnel who examined, photographed, sketched and took notes on the body on the ground within the controlled chaos. Neither moved a muscle for about ten seconds. He broke the silence this time.

“A church, Pepper? A church? Why—”

“I didn’t know what to do myself, Brother Malcolm.”

“If you had, if I believe you, would you have told me?”

She sighed. “If you believe—maybe you would’ve been better prepared. I don’t know. Truth or dare? I tell you the truth and I dare you to believe it. Let’s just do our job, okay?”

She left. Seconds later, he donned his fedora again and followed. What happened in the heavens? Maybe Shepard was right. Maybe he had a bull’s-eye on his chest and the principalities, powers, rulers of darkness and spiritual wickedness in heaven directed their entire depraved wrath at him. He was but a finite number among an infinite number of the saints past, present and future whose final count only God knew. Others suffered worse than he did, but he still wanted and needed closure. Maybe closure in any circumstance was a joke.

He blew out a breath through his mouth, picked up his paces and trailed Pepper's leopard pumps' heels click-clacked rhythms until they crossed the threshold called the crime scene into the circle of death and stood above someone. A lump of something was beneath the ID Unit's plastic tarpaulin. The covered remains were small enough to be a baby.

He addressed Atlanta Zone Six Patrol Officer Wayne Voight, a six foot-two inch, two-hundred and thirty pound white man in his middle thirties with a blonde military buzz cut and a once in a blue moon bodybuilding workout partner with Malcolm who displayed the strength of a man fifty pounds heavier. Voight worked the sector that included Interstate 20 East & West, the eclectic communities of Virginia Highlands, Little Five Points and Cabbagetown. It also included the village of East Lake and its famous East Lake Golf Club the home club of legendary Georgia champion Bobby Jones and the permanent home of The Tour Championship, the final event of the Professional Golfers Association (PGA) season and the FedEx Cup Championship for several years now.

Malcolm viewed the yellow Versa Cones and black numbered evidence markers. He listened to Voight as he detailed the mysterious account of the victim from his pad and pencil means of gathered information. He slipped out of his coat pocket a pair of latex gloves for him and Pepper.

"What do you got Wayne?"

"A mess and not much else. No ID, I'd nix robbery because of the ring, but again no clue as to the victim's ID Sergeant. What I do have is a man who walked by and happened to see them here near the back door of the church. I called the pastor and he's on the way. That was thirty minutes ago so he should be here in a few minutes."

"Them?" Malcolm asked.

As he thought on that, Pepper lifted the tarpaulin and gasped. He looked, caught his own breath, expelled that, and then traded up for righteous indignation, which mildly described his emotional state. He arose and joined Pepper as his fists shook. Those peripherals of his framed her as she looked back at him. The answer to his 'them' question came fast.

Pepper interjected. "C.O.D.?"

Behind the trio waltzed in Chief Medical Examiner Victor Hernandez, MD, with the explanation. Hernandez, a handsome and tanned mid-forties Mexican-American though most people categorized him with other Hispanics or Latinos, made the proud distinction to all who guessed incorrectly. With ancestry that hailed back to the Mexican-American War of 1846-48, he was in his tenth year with the Fulton County Medical Examiner Center; five as Chief M.E.

Married and divorced twice to the same woman, he believed law enforcement solved every crime someday. That's why he never gave up on investigations. He never relayed the same about a second sequel to his former wife. He always crossed his Catholic heart and hoped that idea or ideal to die.

"By my best estimations cause of death was by a sharp blade like an ax. Who in the devil's name would do something like this?"

Malcolm felt his anger too. Nevertheless, they were all professionals and knew how to maintain the decorum of one. That hadn't meant a little spillage didn't do one's motivation to arrest or kill the perpetrator good. Like what he planned to do when he apprehended the source of the assassination—from that day. The police still hadn't a clue despite constant denial by the Gangsta' 40 Posse members.

"Lord have mercy."

Malcolm spied a white man he estimated in his late forties with a few streaks of gray mixed in with his black hair who crossed his heart several times. He scrambled to cover up the remains and attended to the new arrival escorted by a patrol officer at the circumference of the crime scene tape. The man's wardrobe impressed Malcolm: Outfitted in a gray pin-striped business suit, spartan and gray striped tie and gray slip on dress shoes, the color scheme a pleasure for any Ohio State Buckeye fan, the man gathered himself and addressed the officers.

"Pastor James Rowdington. This is my church. Well, the one Jesus let me preside for Him."

"Thank you for your urgency, Pastor Rowdington. I'm Sergeant Hobbs and this is Detective Love. You...saw the victim, no possibility of identification—"

"No, Sergeant Hobbs. None I assure you."

He nodded and patted the Pastor's back. Voight then guided the man back from the scene before Malcolm bowed to the vic with Pepper. He pitied the remains and consented to wry amusement. An offended Pepper called him on it, which he expected.

"Is it Def Comedy Jam time? What's the joke and the punchline because this is neither?"

"You don't see the irony in this?"

"We've been through this already Malcolm—"

"And this—"

He reached under the tarpaulin and found a dismembered arm. He put it back and captured the other one, which was similar except for one enormous difference. He noticed Pepper wanted to speak, but...

"Yeah, a nice, gold, radiant in the early morning sunshine, wedding band. So, Miss Detective, what might this signify? It's simple: A husband is missing a wife."

In the near background, a shriek made its presence known. Both homicide detectives, M.E. Hernandez, Patrol Officer Voight and Pastor Rowdington turned together. It was the man in the Calvin Klein blue jeans, white polo short-sleeved shirt and windbreaker from the precinct house. He attempted to unhinge himself from a patrol officer's hands and after a few blinks of the eye he attained the goal. Feet away from the majority wall of blue before him, he elected to slide between Pastor Rowdington's legs before Malcolm caught his hands and with help pulled him to his feet. Malcolm addressed the man as he blocked any view of the covered remains.

"Sir, do you know who she is?"

Between rushed breaths, "You mentioned a band. Can I see it, please?"

Hernandez, Malcolm, Pepper, Voight and his fellow Patrolman shielded Pastor Rowdington's and the man's vision as Hernandez extracted the band off a finger. The M.E. held it up to view, but forbade the man from any contact. After a few seconds...

"Oh, no. No."

Stunned, the man's mouth hung to the pavement with tears immediate. Pastor Rowdington cut in to Officer Voight's displeasure.

"Is she a member here?"

"Yes, yes. Oh, no."

"What's her name, sir?" Malcolm asked.

He gathered his breath and mustered, "Anastasiya. Anastasiya Goldberg. She's my wife."

Overcome with it all, he fainted in Voight's arms. With care, the patrol officer laid him on the parking lot pavement. His eyes registered the grief felt by them all. Then he summoned ambulatory personnel.

Malcolm returned to the remains. That wry grin returned and so did Pepper's inquisition.

"I like standup as much as the next person provided it's clean. What's the —"

"I just thought that a man, or in this case a woman, never gets too busy to attend his or her own funeral. You can be late for everything else but this."

"Brother Malcolm, I know —"

His head shook in sympathetic tones again. "In every life some rain must fall I guess. I've come to believe that marriage is a leap of faith and God is supposed to be your net, but I question His competence. Well, another day in the life of the ATL Homicide Division. Bob Ross, would you be proud?"

"PBS Bob Ross the painter?"

"Ask Orlando."

Malcolm wondered just how many spiritual paramedics it would take to lead him back to Jesus before he reached the point of no return. He thought upon what that entailed. He perished the thought. With that, he left to check on Mr. Goldberg swarmed by paramedics who administered to him. Pepper copied his actions.