

**3400 Block of Ruby H. Harper Boulevard, SE
Atlanta
2:40 a.m.**

The nineties Ford F-150 pickup cruised at a modest thirty-five miles per hour down the quiet road in the corner of Southeast Atlanta. The driver slowly braked the pickup and made a quick right turn down a long driveway.

**Seven Pillars of Wisdom AME Church
3451 Ruby H. Harper Boulevard, SE
Atlanta
2:45 a.m.**

It was still muggy. But the weather reports wouldn't stop the man who his friends and associates called the Torch. He, his friends, and his associates wanted what was fair. That's not much to ask. *Shouldn't have to be bargained for, either.* Those friends and family paid their dues. More importantly, his family paid those dues for years. His friends' and associates' families had paid those dues for nearly longer than he'd been alive. The time was right, and that time was right now.

The Torch exited the F-150, but he wasn't alone. Several other dark-clothed and masked men joined him. Each took up their two-gallon cans and doused the church with gasoline. Front to back and side-to-side, although they couldn't reach the top easily. Not that the building was all that tall, anyway. Plenty of flaming heat from the other directions would be more than sufficient for the job.

Still under the cloak of darkness, without detection, the Torch directed his troops. A few of them placed devices at different points; others held books of matches. Yet others employed Molotov cocktails. Him? He used a propane tank flamethrower. Surrounded, there was little hope left for old Seven Pillars. He nodded, setting off a wave of similar actions. The matches flew in the windless night. The Molotovs arched at a low height and then plummeted to earth. He had nicknamed his flamethrower Lucille, for his fiery late grandmother on his father's side. His hero. How proud would he be of his only son if he saw him now? The Torch smiled and pulled the trigger on his weapon. In a matter of seconds, whoosh! The Torch ran around to every side of the church and coated it with Lucille's deadly onslaught as quickly as possible. The man took one loving look at the building inferno and prayed to God it was enough. He believed in prayer, and believed that God would meet a person where they were in life. He was no military man, nor had he ever wanted to be in the service. But he agreed with the credo of God, family, and country.

The Torch gathered his troops. As quietly as they arrived, they returned to their ride and departed in the F-150. He bit his lip as he looked out the rearview window as the church drowned in the flames, followed shortly by a series of booms. He prayed again that this was enough.

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Midtown Lofts at 14th Street

525 14th Street

#509

Atlanta

6:30 a.m.

In Northeast Atlanta, the Midtown Lofts contained 240 loft units with one, two, or three bedrooms near the intersection of 14th Street and Northside Drive. Conveniently located north of the Georgia Tech campus and south of the Atlanta City Water Works Reservoir compound, the young complex provided easy access to I-75 and I-85 north and south.

He was back. Indeed, welcome back to Malcolm Xavier Hobbs. After the battle of his career against Philip Reddinger and the *Vanguard*, he quickly got back into the flow as sergeant of Atlanta PD's X-Men Homicide Squad. The city of Atlanta continued to heal from the conflict. So, relatively speaking, homicides and other crimes were down from several months ago. Was he bored with that fact and truth? No. In some backhanded, blessed way, the encounter quelled some of the criminal aggressiveness that he and the APD were so used to dealing with daily. Hallelujah and glory to God for it.

He finished his breakfast of French toast, two turkey sausage patties, and a three-egg white omelet with pepper jack cheese, mushrooms, and tomato. Coffee and cream with light sugar and a six-ounce glass of orange juice topped it off. This was his week off from his bodybuilding regimen, used to rejuvenate his body after he trained for four to six straight weeks. He kept up his supplement intake and popped Vitamins A, B, C, and E, among others. The scale last week read two hundred and fifteen pounds for his six feet. His primary doctor still had an issue, believing that his body fat needed to hover around 10 percent. He told the doctor he aimed for 6 to 7 percent. In his competitive bodybuilding days, it was regularly as low as 3 to 3.5 percent, and doc' wasn't happy with that! Now, he's out of the so-called danger zone, so cut him some slack. He laughed.

Overall, he felt pretty good about where he was in life. But there was one, well two, potential hotspots he'd faced for some time now, and he expected them to intensify as more time elapsed. First was the whole Defund the Police stratagem. The cops, from Chief Davis to the rank and file, had heard the critiques of police officers nationwide. Second, since he worked right next to him, Detective Orlando Queen made brilliant deductions in deciphering criminal what-if scenarios. It was

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Orlando's big mouth that led to his suspension. The thought, and rightly so, was that Malcolm Hobbs was one of many in line who wanted to punch him in that mouth. On the other side, if that truth were told, he and only he controlled his emotions and emotional reactions. Well, with the help of the Holy Spirit. He needed Him and the Word of God like every living thing needed oxygen to live.

He rinsed off his dishes and put them in the dishwasher to the left of the sink. He had just set himself down to watch the local news when he pulled his cell phone from his pants pocket, jazz artist Paul Hardcastle and the Jazzmasters' classic tune "Rainforest" ringing out.

"Hobbs..."

He listened and allowed his eyes to roll to the ceiling. Then he caught wind of a breaking news story on the massive seventy-five-inch HDTV flat screen mounted in a corner of his living room before his black leather recliner. Fire had set something ablaze. The flames knew what it consumed, but they hadn't known that they lit up something else as well. His wrath was for the offender's choice of target.

Seven Pillars of Wisdom AME Church
3451 Ruby H. Harper Boulevard, SE
Atlanta
7:15 A.M.

Malcolm drove to headquarters to park his personal car. Now, he drove the department's dark blue unmarked Ford Taurus southbound down Ruby H. Harper Boulevard, which splits off from Browns Mill Road. Ruby ran to the outskirts of Atlanta and rested between I-75 to the west and I-285 to the east. He passed by small independent businesses from home and lawn care, auto mechanic shops, a day care center, and an elementary school on his way to the destination of Seven Pillars of Wisdom AME Church.

APD patrol officers had already cordoned off the scene with the black and yellow 'POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS' tape. The Atlanta Fire Rescue Department (AFRD) handled their business a time ago, but still accessed the scene and conversed with patrol. He stopped the Taurus outside the cordoned off perimeter of the church. The smell of gasoline burned wood and church interior furnishings wafted in the air. This world has lost much respect for all things sacrosanct, Malcolm thought. Church burnings weren't anything new, but it had been a good long while since he'd heard of any incidents. Certainly not in his jurisdiction.

Off this sad thought, two of the X-Men Homicide Squad Detectives from his personal unit pulled to a stop in their dark blue Ford Taurus. Detective Selena Monet exited from the driver's side. The late twenties, butter pecan complexioned, brunette New Orleans and California Creole hottie proved her worth with years combating the criminal underworld as an undercover in the APD Vice Squad. Standing five foot six inches tall, she was a veteran of the elite team for over five years. She stood sharp as a tack in her blue themed buttoned-down blouse, slacks, and low-heeled pumps, and the old school 90s 'Hat Squad' Atlanta Homicide signature of a blue fedora with a combo of brown/blue feathers. Her passenger side partner, Shepard Cush, stepped out of the car. He cut his crime fighting teeth in Columbus, OH, and was the most recent addition to the squad. He stood six-foot-two with an estimated weight of one-hundred and eighty pounds. As light skinned as Selena, the African American detective brought a perfect arrest record from Ohio's state capital. A jet-black fedora with white feathers atop his head, he continued the monochrome theme with a black shirt and pants, white tie with black dots, and black dress shoes. He'd pass for a fashion model.

The twosome approached their boss with some quizzical expressions. Malcolm understood it, but they all knew their job descriptions. They exchanged handshakes.

"Shep, you're going to burn up, man, from all that black."

"Is that not true? But at 7 in the morning, Sarge? Georgia, Georgia."

"Summer muggy season is here, my brothers," Selena said. "Georgia humidity in full attire sticking to your skin effect. Both of you know that by now."

She shot a smile at Shepard. He shook his head.

"Have I gotten used to these ATL summers yet? I don't need to answer that question with another answer or another question."

Malcolm smiled too. Then they turned to the crime scene. Grim was a word that described their faces.

"Sergeant Hobbs! Over here."

A patrol officer summoned the trio inside of the crime scene tape for the still pungent and smoking remains. The man turned to the homicide detectives. His badge, which glistened in the bright morning sun on his dark colored short-sleeved uniform shirt, read, 'OFC. HENDRICKS.'

"I know arson isn't your forte, Sergeant Hobbs—"

"For sure, unless you've found something other than burned building materials."

He nodded.

"Yeah, this way."

The three detectives pulled out latex gloves from pants pockets. They followed the officer while in their background, the Atlanta Crime Scene Unit van turned off Ruby Harper and onto the former church's driveway. Not far behind CSU, the Fulton County Medical Examiner's own van followed the same trek. Several other patrol officers and some AFRD members, still in investigation mode, met Malcolm, Selena, and Shepard. They stopped amid the charcoal-colored scraps and the burned wooden frames that collapsed in disarray about them.

"Fire personnel were rooting out some fiery fragments and discovered these."

Malcolm watched Hendricks as he pointed downward to what appeared to his detective skills to be a collection of dirty, broken bones. He ogled Selena and Shepard. Silenced voices only lasted a few seconds. Shepard extracted a small notepad from his pants pocket with a black ink pen.

"Was anyone inside this time of night?"

"No sir, Sergeant. Far as the pastor was concerned, they locked the church down for the night. Custodial services only work on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays."

"Church staff or independent contractors?"

He viewed Shepard.

“Not sure, detective. Be a good question for the pastor, though.”

He nodded at Hendricks as he wrote. Malcolm then Selena bent down to the ground.

“I’m not a forensic scientist, but I see burn marks on some bones. Plus, fragments are everywhere.”

Malcolm voiced his thoughts along Selena’s line of thinking as Shepard kept writing.

“Maybe a shallow grave site and AFRD unknowingly might have created the fragment damage.”

She nodded at Malcolm, then continued.

“Don’t label me crazy, but is it a possibility that some explosive device detonated inside of the church?”

Malcolm turned to his left and addressed a nearby Fire Inspector. When the officer turned toward him, they shared a smile and shook hands. The fireman’s gold badge read ‘INSPECTOR VALENTINE’.

“Malcolm, been a long time. How are you?”

“Wally, it has indeed. Doing good, man.”

Wally Valentine worked on a few arson homicides several years ago with him. Mid-thirties, smallish at five foot six and about one-hundred and forty pounds, the white firefighter had been on the job for about seven or eight years. It was good to have his expertise on this case from the start.

“What do you have, Malcolm?”

“Yeah, did you find any explosive material on site?”

“The known accelerant was gasoline. We found several glass bottles with what appeared to be blackened cloth wicks.”

“Can you say, Molotov cocktails anyone?”

Valentine nodded at Shepard.

“But anything else unusual in your findings?”

“Affirmative, Sergeant. Grenade fragments—”

“Grenades?”

“Yes, ma’am. Lots of grenade fragments.”

As Selena absorbed that information nugget, Malcolm took inventory of their surroundings. He stretched out his right arm and pointed at a section of ground in the near distance.

“Is that part of what I think it is?”

Valentine and his detectives narrowed their vision on the spot in question.

“Whoa, how did we miss that? My apologies for it, Malcolm. Guys, we need to sweep this site again now.”

Shepard stepped up to Malcolm.

“What’s up, Sarge?”

“If I’m not mistaken, that—” he pointed at the spot again, “is a piece of an IED. If there’s one, there are probably others.”

Shepard thought upon that point.

“Are we talking about some type of military assault on a church? Maybe non-religious services. Is some radical hate group to blame?”

“It’s certainly looking that way, Shepard.”

“But which one of the above?”

“I discount nothing. It could be both military and a hate group.”

Selena cleared her throat as she spoke up.

“I’m not sure if evacuation for us is the next appropriate sequence of movement.”

Shepard was incredulous at Selena.

“Excuse me? IEDs under foot and you’re not sure if we should evacuate or not? Girl, I think this morning’s mugginess and the inferno has gotten to you. Why would you think that?”

“Well, either I’m standing on one and my hands are touching one... or we got what once was in fully fleshed out terms...”

Her breath caught in her throat as Malcolm approached.

“What do we got?”

Malcolm’s silence served as the answer to his question.

“Hey guys, you got a GPR?”

Decked out in a dark lightweight jacket with ‘ATLANTA CRIME SCENE UNIT’ on the back, Photographer John Tanaka answered him.

“Yes sir, Sergeant Hobbs.”

“Good, bring it, John. I got a feeling the cliché tip of the iceberg starts now.”

Atlanta Public Safety Headquarters
Homicide Unit/ 3rd Floor
226 Peachtree Street, SW
Downtown Atlanta
7:58 A.M.

Atlanta's Homicide Division was part of the Criminal Investigations Division (CID) composed of the Major Crimes Section that included Major Crimes Response, Special Victims, Aggravated Assault, Domestic Violence, Animal Cruelty, Robbery and Crime Stoppers. The room housed a network of cubicle offices for the detectives while the superiors' spaces separated themselves from their underlings with private offices. The X-Men Homicide Squad sat near to one another amid the setting.

Veteran Detective Orlando Queen adorned himself in a crisp long sleeved white dress shirt, brown slacks, black belt and polished to reflect the sunlight brown dress shoes. The melanin heavy African American detective sat at his desk sipping on black coffee from a saucer-less red colored *Atlanta Falcons* mug. Queen was a member of the famed X-Men Homicide Squad, led by his boss, Sergeant Malcolm X. Hobbs.

Humph. The man was back in the detectin' fold after his suspension and punch nearly decapitated his detective, Orlando thought. He rubbed his jawline in remembrance, chuckled aloud, and shifted a toothpick to the right corner of his mouth. Several detectives sat within their cubicle spaces, tappin' their mouses and readin' the computer info on the monitors. He stood up and walked a shortened distance to the Profile Board to the left of his desk against the far wall. Names of the victims, dates of the crimes, time of day for the crimes, locations of the crime scenes, the detectives assigned to each case, black marker writin's if they solved the cases and red marker writin's if the cases weren't. What had his eyes beheld? He needed a few drops of *Clear Eyes* or *Visine*. He exhaled deeply. Footsteps click-clacked behind him, and it drew a grin. All the cops that bounded in and out of this division and he always knew who it was that produced that sound.

"Good morning. Staring at the unsolved won't get them solved."

His grin grew.

"Oh, there's a fresh line, mon amie and good mornin'. No, I'm thinkin' retirement on the horizon."

She stopped next to him at the board.

"Retirement on the horizon? Anything you want to discuss?"

"Many things. But those are smokescreen topics for a trip to the tropics."

"I'm here if you need me like always."

He nodded.

"Appreciate you the same, Pepper."

The last X-Men Homicide Squad member, experienced Pepper Love, rounded a few cubicles to her desk station next to Orlando's. He watched her as she spied on him with a concerned expression. They shared smiles as she unloaded her red leather Gucci purse onto the desk's surface. Red was the theme via her blouse, slacks, belt, and mid-heeled attire. Her white colored index fingernail, that contrasted with the other four fuchsia shaded fingernails, clicked the CPU, and monitor on to start the day. He looked back at the Board.

Love stood five feet eight inches tall and sported a well-proportioned one-hundred and thirty-five pounds on her cinnamon-coated African American frame. She styled her shoulder-length, full mane of natural raven hair into a ponytail. She motioned to speak to him when her cell phone played the Tasha Cobbs Leonard hit, "I'm Getting Ready."

"Hey, good morning, Malcolm... Oh, wow... oh, no, no... Okay, we're on it..."

She grabbed a pen from a holder on her desk and wrote the information down on notebook paper. Orlando walked toward her and looked over the cubicle formations.

"Okay, Malcolm. We're on the way now."

She nodded at Orlando, and he walked fast to his desk.

"Thanks. See you soon. Bye."

"Sounds like we got the call, Pep' Lo'."

"Yes, we did, unfortunately."

"It's the homicide detectives' marchin' song. Where are we headed?"

"South Atlanta northeast of Hartsfield-Jackson. You want to drive?"

"He called you, you the man."

She nodded and snatched up her red fedora and like feathers. Orlando adjusted his white fedora with white, black, and brown feathers in his. No further words. They were out.