

# ONE

**THE REAR DOOR TO ST. ANTHONY'S CHURCH HAD BEEN LEFT OPEN. EXACTLY AS I** *had been promised.* John Sampson and I eased in through the dimly lit sacristy, the room where the priests dressed for services and where they stored the altar wine, the hymnals, and the vestments.

"Sugar, I hope we don't have to shoot some dude in a church," Sampson said in a stage whisper. "Your Nana'd be predicting me for a slot in the fire."

"Especially if you pulled the trigger in church tonight."

"Not funny, Alex."

"Who's laughing, John? If you shot someone in a church on Christmas Eve and I didn't stop you, Nana Mama would be signing *me* up for a slot right next to you in the big burn."

We made our way along a short, narrow hallway that led to the darkened apse and the altar itself. We stayed in

the hall, looking out. Except for some flickering votives, some dim overheads, and a hanging candle near the altar table, there was no light in the church.

There couldn't have been more than three or four people in the place. An old woman clicking her rosary beads, a homeless guy napping in the front pew, an older man reading a prayer book and muttering curses. I carefully checked out each of them.

Then a young girl in a fur coat, a coat way too fancy for St. Anthony's, barged out of the confessional box on the near side of the church. She was sobbing into a long striped scarf. The priest came out after her. Father Harris placed his hand on her shoulder and led her to a pew, knelt by her.

The padre was a very nice guy, and a very good priest, the kind of man you did favors for if you could.

I looked around at the sparse wreaths that decorated the church. I'd been attending St. Anthony's since I was ten years old and I couldn't remember the place ever seeming so bare at Christmas. In fact, the church looked depressing.

I waited until I was sure all the worshippers had their heads down, and then I walked quickly along the front of the altar and knelt at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the carved oak pulpit. The Man Mountain stayed on the sacristy side and knelt among the bright red poinsettia plants, the lectern and the chairs used by the priest and altar boys between him and the pews.

A moment later, the girl nodded and left. Father Harris paused, glanced toward our positions, and then went out a side door.

Except for steam ticking in the registers, St. Anthony's fell quiet. Kneeling there with my back to the crucifix high on the rear wall felt odd and somehow wrong. Then again, the entire thing felt strange. I don't think I'd been at an altar in more than thirty-five years. Not since I had been at that very altar making my confirmation, when I was twelve.

That day, the bishop prayed over us as we were being confirmed, saying, "Fill them with Your spirit of fear, O Lord." It's a prayer that I have always found peculiar because as a rule, I see God as a source of courage and direction, not fear. But I'm not a priest, and so, as Sampson likes to say, what do I know?

We held our positions, in any case, and waited, knowing we had only an hour to pull this off. At six, the priests and friars from the priory next door would come to prepare the church for Midnight Mass. At six, this little stakeout would be over and I'd be going home for a well-deserved holiday with my family.

I have been called cynical more than once in my life. In my line of work, it's often tough to be positive or idealistic about much of anything. But as the minutes passed inside St. Anthony's, I smelled the incense and the fir boughs and watched the votive candles flickering near the manger scene, and I remembered coming here on Christmases past. There was a sameness to the place, a calm sense of the unchanging that got to me.

I felt my muscles relax, and my mind slowed to things that were important, like humbleness and gratitude, which Nana Mama always said were the keys to a long,

satisfying life. Seeing how my grandmother was in her nineties and going strong, I tried hard to listen closely when she said stuff like that. Kneeling there behind the pulpit, I ignored the terrible things I'd seen in the year almost gone by and thanked my Lord and Savior for all the blessings I'd received. My wife. My grandmother. My children. My friends. My job. My life.

And as I did, I felt less cynical, humbled by my good fortune. My life was very good. Maybe not perfect, but very good. And not many people get to say that in this day and age, especially at this time of year.

Maybe Nana Mama was right. I needed to come to church more—

A whisper punctured the darkness. Sampson among the poinsettias: “Is this what they mean when they say they're using a cop as a plant?”

I just shook my head. Nothing like a bad pun to help pass the time on a church stakeout. I heard a clatter and looked around the pulpit. The older lady had dropped her rosary beads. She reached over, got them back from the pew in front of her. Then I saw someone come out from the confessional booth next to the one where the woman in the fur coat had been.

He was a young guy, and he was a big guy. He slouched slowly up the center aisle, as if deep in prayer, moving toward the main doors.

This had to be our man.

I signaled Sampson, and the two of us moved forward quickly, eased over the rail into the nave, and began walking up the side aisles, one of us on each side. We

kept our right hands in our coats, fingers resting on our guns.

The guy in question stepped out of the church proper into the foyer and stopped at the holy water font. He dipped his left hand in and held it there. A left hand in holy water is a big no-no. *Right hand only*. And the font's no place to keep your fingers more than a second.

Then I saw what I had half expected to. With his left hand still in the holy water font, he shook his right arm, and a pry bar slid out of the sleeve of his coat.

Anticipating that he'd look around before attacking the parish donation and Franciscan charities boxes, I stopped with a pillar between us.

The second I heard metal on metal, I snapped my fingers, got up my gun, and moved to meet and greet the man of the year who'd returned to rip off the poor. In church. On Christmas Eve.

# TWO

**FATHER HARRIS FLIPPED A SWITCH BACK IN THE SACRISTY. EVERY LIGHT IN ST. Anthony's went on. The man of the year bolted, carrying the crowbar like it was the baton in a relay race. He shouldered his way through the front door and bounded down the steps as the first snowflakes of the year began to fall.**

Sampson and I were right behind him, and we were almost on top of the perp before he reached the corner. I got to him first and hammered him with my fist between the shoulder blades. He sprawled hard on the sidewalk. Sampson put a knee on his back and cuffed him. It was done in less than a minute.

I rolled him over, looked at my partner, and said, "John, say merry Christmas to our old friend Latrell Lewis."

"It is Lewis! Holy shit!" said Sampson, and then, re-