

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE CARTEL*

DON WINSLOW

'Mesmerizing, a triumph.
Think *The Godfather*, only with
cops. It's that good' **STEPHEN KING**

THE FORCE

'Probably the best cop novel
ever written' **LEE CHILD**

*Sunday
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**THRILLER
OF THE
MONTH**

WE'RE ALL CORRUPT. JUST IN OUR OWN WAYS.

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The Force

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‘Probably the best cop novel ever written’ Lee Child
From the New York Times bestselling author of The Cartel – winner of the Ian Fleming Steel Dagger Award for Best Thriller of the Year – comes The Force, a cinematic epic as explosive, powerful, and unforgettable as The Wire. Everyone can be bought. At the right price... Detective Sergeant Denny Malone leads an elite unit to fight gangs, drugs and guns in New York. For eighteen years he’s been on the front lines, doing whatever it takes to survive in a city built by ambition and corruption, where no one is clean. What only a few know is that Denny Malone himself is dirty: he and his partners have stolen millions of dollars in drugs and cash. Now he’s caught in a trap and being squeezed by the FBI. He must walk a thin line of betrayal, while the city teeters on the brink of a racial conflagration that could destroy them all.

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ON
WINSLO

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AND

Copyright

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During the time that I was writing this novel, the following law enforcement personnel were murdered in the line of duty. This book is dedicated to them:

Sergeant Cory Blake Wride, Deputy Sheriff Percy Lee House III, Deputy Sheriff Jonathan Scott Pine, Correctional Officer Amanda Beth Baker, Detective John Thomas Hobbs, Agent Joaquin Correa-Ortega, Officer Jason Marc Crisp, Chief Deputy Sheriff Allen Ray "Pete" Richardson, Officer Robert Gordon German, Master-at-Arms Mark Aaron Mayo, Officer Mark Hayden Larson, Officer Alexander Edward Thalmann, Officer David Wayne Smith Jr., Officer Christopher Alan Cortijo, Deputy Sheriff Michael J. Seversen, Trooper Gabriel Lenox Rich, Sergeant Patrick "Scott" Johnson, Officer Roberto Carlos Sanchez, Trooper Chelsea Renee Richard, Master Sergeant John Thomas Collum, Officer Michael Alexander Petrina, Detective Charles David Dinwiddie, Officer Stephen J. Arkell, Officer Jair Abelardo Cabrera, Trooper Christopher G. Skinner, Special Deputy Marshal Frank Edward McKnight, Officer Brian Wayne Jones, Officer Kevin Dorian Jordan, Officer Igor Soldo, Officer Alyn Ronnie Beck, Chief of Police Lee Dixon, Deputy Sheriff Allen Morris Bares Jr., Officer Perry Wayne Renn, Patrolman Jeffrey Brady Westerfield, Detective Melvin Vincent Santiago, Officer Scott Thomas Patrick, Chief of Police Michael Anthony Pimentel, Agent Geniel Amaro-Fantauzzi, Officer Daryl Pierson, Patrolman Nikolaus Edward Schultz, Corporal Jason Eugene Harwood, Deputy Sheriff Joseph John Matuskovic, Corporal Bryon Keith Dickson II, Deputy Sheriff Michael Andrew Norris, Sergeant Michael Joe Naylor, Deputy Sheriff Danny Paul Oliver, Detective Michael David Davis Jr., Deputy Sheriff Yevhen "Eugene" Kostiuchenko, Deputy Sheriff Jesse Valdez III, Officer Shaun Richard Diamond, Officer David Smith Payne, Constable Robert Parker White, Deputy Sheriff Matthew Scott Chism, Officer Justin Robert Winebrenner,

Deputy Sheriff Christopher Lynd Smith, Agent Edwin O. Roman-Acevedo, Officer Wenjian Liu, Officer Rafael Ramos, Officer Charles Kondek, Officer Tyler Jacob Stewart, Detective Terence Avery Green, Officer Robert Wilson III, Deputy U.S. Marshal Josie Wells, Patrolman George S. Nissen, Officer Alex K. Yazzie, Officer Michael Johnson, Trooper Trevor Casper, Officer Brian Raymond Moore, Sergeant Greg Moore, Officer Liquori Tate, Officer Benjamin Deen, Deputy Sonny Smith, Detective Kerrie Orozco, Trooper Taylor Thyfault, Patrolman James Arthur Bennett Jr., Officer Gregg “Nigel” Benner, Officer Rick Silva, Officer Sonny Kim, Officer Daryle Holloway, Sergeant Christopher Kelley, Corrections Officer Timothy Davison, Sergeant Scott Lunger, Officer Sean Michael Bolton, Officer Thomas Joseph LaValley, Deputy Sheriff Carl G. Howell, Trooper Steven Vincent, Officer Henry Nelson, Deputy Sheriff Darren Goforth, Sergeant Miguel Perez-Rios, Trooper Joseph Cameron Ponder, Deputy Sheriff Dwight Darwin Maness, Deputy Sheriff Bill Myers, Officer Gregory Thomas Alia, Detective Randolph A. Holder, Officer Daniel Scott Webster, Officer Bryce Edward Hanes, Officer Daniel Neil Ellis, Chief of Police Darrell Lemond Allen, Trooper Jaimie Lynn Jursevics, Officer Ricardo Galvez, Corporal William Matthew Solomon, Officer Garrett Preston Russell Swasey, Officer Lloyd E. Reed Jr., Officer Noah Leotta, Commander Frank Roman Rodriguez, Lieutenant Luz M. Soto Segarra, Agent Rosario Hernandez de Hoyos, Officer Thomas W. Cottrell Jr., Special Agent Scott McGuire, Officer Douglas Scott Barney II, Sergeant Jason Goodding, Deputy Derek Geer, Deputy Mark F. Logsdon, Deputy Patrick B. Dailey, Major Gregory E. “Lem” Barney, Officer Jason Moszer, Special Agent Lee Tartt, Corporal Nate Carrigan, Officer Ashley Marie Guindon, Officer David Stefan Hofer, Deputy Sheriff John Robert Kotfila Jr., Officer Allen Lee Jacobs, Deputy Carl A. Koontz, Officer Carlos Puente-Morales, Officer Susan Louise Farrell, Trooper Chad Phillip Dermeyer, Officer Steven M. Smith, Detective Brad D. Lancaster, Officer David Glasser, Officer Ronald Tarentino Jr., Officer Verdell Smith Sr., Officer Natasha Maria Hunter, Officer Endy Nddiobong Ekpanya, Deputy Sheriff David Francis Michel Jr., Officer Brent Alan Thompson, Sergeant Michael Joseph Smith, Officer Patrick E. Zamarripa, Officer Lorne Bradley Ahrens, Officer Michael Leslie Krol, Security Supervisor Joseph Zangaro, Court Officer Ronald Eugene Kienzle, Deputy Sheriff Bradford Allen Garafola, Officer Matthew Lane Gerald, Corporal Montrell Lyle Jackson, Officer Marco Antonio Zarate, Corrections Officer Mari Johnson, Correctional Officer Kristopher D. Moules, Captain Robert D. Melton, Officer Clint Corvinus, Officer Jonathan De Guzman, Officer José Ismael Chavez, Special Agent De’Greaun Frazier, Corporal Bill Cooper, Officer John Scott Martin, Officer Kenneth Ray Moats, Officer Kevin “Tim” Smith, Sergeant Steve Owen, Master Deputy Sheriff Brandon Collins, Officer Timothy James Brackeen, Officer Lesley Zerebny, Officer Jose Gilbert Vega, Officer Scott Leslie Bashioum, Sergeant Luis A. Meléndez-Maldonado, Deputy Sheriff Jack Hopkins, Correctional Officer Kenneth Bettis, Deputy Sheriff Dan Glaze, Officer Myron Jarrett, Sergeant Allen Brandt, Officer Blake Curtis Snyder, Sergeant Kenneth Steil, Officer Justin Martin, Sergeant Anthony Beminio, Sergeant Paul Tuozzolo, Deputy Sheriff Dennis Wallace, Detective Benjamin Edward Marconi, Deputy Commander Patrick Thomas Carothers, Officer Collin James Rose, Trooper Cody James Donahue.

Epigraph

“Cops are just people,” she said irrelevantly.

“They start out that way, I’ve heard.”

—RAYMOND CHANDLER, *FAREWELL, MY LOVELY*

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THE LAST GUY

The last guy on earth anyone ever expected to end up in the Metropolitan Correctional Center on Park Row was Denny Malone.

You said the mayor, the president of the United States, the pope—people in New York would have laid odds they'd see them behind bars before they saw Detective First Grade Dennis John Malone.

A hero cop.

The son of a hero cop.

A veteran sergeant in the NYPD's most elite unit.

The Manhattan North Special Task Force.

And, most of all, a guy who knows where all the skeletons are hidden, because he put half of them there himself.

Malone and Russo and Billy O and Big Monty and the rest made these streets their own, and they ruled them like kings. They made them safe and kept them safe for the decent people trying to make lives there, and that was their job and their passion and their love, and if that meant they worked the corners of the plate and put a little something extra on the ball now and then, that's what they did.

The people, they don't know what it takes sometimes to keep them safe and it's better that they don't.

They may think they want to know, they may say they want to know, but they don't.

Malone and the Task Force, they weren't just any cops on the Job. You got thirty-eight thousand wearing blue, Denny Malone and his guys were the 1 percent of the 1 percent of the 1 percent—the smartest, the toughest, the quickest, the bravest, the best, the baddest.

The Manhattan North Special Task Force.

“Da Force” blew through the city like a cold, harsh, fast and violent wind, scouring the streets and alleys, the playgrounds, parks and projects, scraping away the trash and the filth, a predatory storm blowing away the predators.

A strong wind finds its way through every crack, into the project stairwells, the tenement heroin mills, the social club back rooms, the new-money condos, the old-money penthouses. From Columbus Circle to the Henry Hudson Bridge, Riverside Park to the Harlem River, up Broadway and Amsterdam, down Lenox and St. Nicholas, on the numbered streets that spanned the Upper West Side, Harlem, Washington Heights and Inwood, if there was a secret Da Force didn't know about, it was because it hadn't been whispered about or even thought of yet.

Drug deals and gun deals, traffic in people and property, rapes, robberies and assaults, crimes hatched in English, Spanish, French, Russian over collard greens and smothered chicken or jerk pork or pasta marinara or gourmet meals at five-star restaurants in a city made from sin and for profit.

Da Force hit them all, but especially guns and drugs, because guns kill and drugs incite the killings.

Now Malone's in lockup, the wind has stopped blowing, but everyone knows it's the eye of the storm, the dead quiet lull that comes before the worst of it. Denny Malone in the hands of the feds? Not IAB, not the state's attorneys, but the feds, where no one in the city can touch him?

Everyone's hunkered down, shitting bricks and waiting for that blow, that tsunami, because with what Malone knows, he could take out commanders, chiefs, even the commissioner. He could roll on prosecutors, judges—shit, he could serve the feds the mayor on the proverbial silver platter with at least one congressman and a couple of real estate billionaires as appetizers.

So as the word went out that Malone was sitting in the MCC, people in the eye of the hurricane got scared, real scared, started to seek shelter even in the calm, even knowing that there are no walls high enough, no cellars deep enough—not at One Police, not at the Criminal Courts Building, not

even at Gracie Mansion or in the penthouse palaces lining Fifth Avenue and Central Park South—to keep them safe from what’s in Denny Malone’s head.

If Malone wants to pull the whole city down around him, he can.

Then again, no one’s ever really been safe from Malone and his crew.

Malone’s guys made headlines—the *Daily News*, the *Post*, Channels 7, 4 and 2; “film at eleven” cops. Recognized-on-the-street cops, the-mayor-knows-your-name cops, comped seats at the Garden, the Meadowlands, Yankee Stadium and Shea, walk-into-any-restaurant-bar-or-club-in-the-city-and-get-treated-like-royalty cops.

And of this pack of alphas, Denny Malone is the undisputed leader.

Walks into any house in the city, the uniforms and the rookies stop and stare, the lieutenants give him a nod, even the captains know not to step on his shoes.

He’s earned their respect.

Among other things (Shit, you want to talk about the robberies he stopped, the bullet he took, the kid in that hostage situation he saved? The busts, the takedowns, the convictions?), Malone and his team, they made the biggest drug bust in the history of New York.

Fifty kilos of heroin.

And the Dominican who was trafficking it gone.

Along with a hero cop.

Malone’s crew laid their partner in the ground—bagpipes, folded flag, black ribbons over shields—and went right back to work because the slingers and the gangs and the robbers and the rapists and the wiseguys, they don’t take time off to grieve. You wanna keep your streets safe, you gotta be on those streets—days, nights, weekends, holidays, whatever it takes, and your wives, they knew what they signed up for, and your kids, they learn to understand that’s what Daddy does, he puts the bad guys behind bars.

Except now it’s him in the cage, Malone sitting on a steel bench in a holding cell like the dirtbags he usually puts there, bent over, his head in his hands, worrying about his partners—his brothers on Da Force—and what’s going to happen to them now that he’s put them neck deep in shit.

Worrying about his family—his wife, who didn’t sign up for this, his two kids, a son and a daughter who are too young to understand now, but when they’re old enough are never going to forgive why they had to grow up without a father.

Then there’s Claudette.

Fucked up in her own way.

Needy, needing him, and he’s not going to be there.

For her or for anybody, so he doesn’t know now what’s going to happen to the people he loves.

The wall he’s staring at doesn’t have any answers, either, as to how he got here.

No, fuck that, Malone thinks. At least be honest with yourself, he thinks as he sits there with nothing in front of him but time.

At least, at last, tell yourself the truth.

You know exactly how you got here.

Step by motherfucking step.

Our ends know our beginnings but the reverse isn’t true.

When Malone was a kid, the nuns taught him that even before we’re born, God—and only God—knows the days of our lives and the day of our death and who and what we’ll become.

Well, I wish he’d fucking shared it with me, Malone thinks. Given me a word, a tip, dined me out, ratted on me to myself, told me something, anything. Said, Hey, jerkoff, you took a left, you should have gone right.

But no, nothing.

All he's seen, Malone isn't a big fan of God and figures the feeling is mutual. He has a lot of questions he'd like to ask him, but if he ever got him in the room, God'd probably shut his mouth, lawyer up, let his own kid take the jolt.

All this time on the Job, Malone lost his faith, so when the moment came when he was looking the devil in the eye, there was nothing between Malone and murder except ten pounds of trigger pull.

Ten pounds of gravity.

It was Malone's finger pulled the trigger, but maybe it was gravity that pulled him down—the relentless, unforgiving gravity of eighteen years on the Job.

Pulling him down to where he is now.

Malone didn't start out to end up here. Didn't throw his hat in the air the day he graduated the Academy and took the oath, the happiest day of his life—the brightest, bluest, best day—thinking that he'd end up here.

No, he started with his eyes firmly on the guiding star, his feet planted on the path, but that's the thing about the life you walk—you start out pointed true north, but you vary one degree off, it doesn't matter for maybe one year, five years, but as the years stack up you're just walking farther and farther away from where you started out to go, you don't even know you're lost until you're so far from your original destination you can't even see it anymore.

You can't even get back on the path to start over.

Time and gravity won't allow it.

And Denny Malone would give a lot to start over.

Hell, he'd give everything.

Because he never thought he'd end up in the federal lockup on Park Row. No one did, except maybe God, and he wasn't talking.

But here Malone is.

Without his gun or his shield or anything else that says what and who he is, what and who he was.

A dirty cop.

PROLOGUE

THE RIP

Lenox Avenue,

Honey.

Midnight.

And the gods are laughing at us.

—LANGSTON HUGHES, “LENOX AVENUE: MIDNIGHT”

Harlem, New York City

July 2016

Four A.M.

When the city that never sleeps at least lies down and closes its eyes.

This is what Denny Malone thinks as his Crown Vic slides up the spine of Harlem.

Behind the walls and windows, in apartments and hotels, tenements and project towers, people are sleeping or can't, are dreaming or are beyond dreams. People are fighting or fucking or both, making love and making babies, screaming curses or speaking soft, intimate words meant for each other and not the street. Some try to rock infants back to sleep, or are just getting up for another day of work, while others cut kilos of heroin into glassine bags to sell to the addicts for their wake-up shots.

After the hookers and before the street cleaners, that's the window of time you have to make a rip, Malone knows. Nothing good ever happens after midnight, is what his old man used to say, and he knew. He was a cop on these streets, coming home in the morning after a graveyard shift with murder in his eyes, death in his nose and an icicle in his heart that never melted and eventually killed him. Got out of the car in the driveway one morning and his heart cracked. The doctors said he was dead before he hit the ground.

Malone found him there.

Eight years old, leaving the house to walk to school, he saw the blue overcoat in the pile of dirty snow he'd helped his dad shovel off the driveway.

Now it's before dawn and already hot. One of those summers when God the landlord refuses to turn the heat down or the air-conditioning on—the city edgy and irritable, on the brink of a flameout, a fight or a riot, the smell of old garbage and stale urine, sweet, sour, sickly and corrupt as an old whore's perfume.

Denny Malone loves it.

Even in the daytime when it's baking hot and noisy, when the gangbangers are on the corners and the hip-hop bass beats hurt your ears, and bottles, cans, dirty diapers and plastic bags of piss come flying out of project windows, and the dog shit stinks in the fetid heat, he wouldn't be anywhere else in the world.

It's his city, his turf, his heart.

Rolling up Lenox now, past the old Mount Morris Park neighborhood and its graceful brownstones, Malone worships the small gods of place—the twin towers of Ebenezer Gospel Tabernacle, where the hymns float out on Sundays with the voices of angels, then the distinctive spire of Ephesus Seventh-Day Adventist and, farther up the block, Harlem Shake—not the dance but some of the best damn burgers in the city.

Then there are the dead gods—the old Lenox Lounge, with its iconic neon sign, red front and all that history. Billie Holiday used to sing there, Miles Davis and John Coltrane played their horns, and it was a hang for James Baldwin, Langston Hughes and Malcolm X. It's closed now—the window covered with brown paper, the sign dark—but there's talk about opening it again.

Malone doubts it.

Dead gods don't rise again except in fairy tales.

He crosses 125th, a.k.a. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

Urban pioneers and the black middle class have gentrified the area, which the Realtors have now christened "SoHa," a blended acronym always being the death knell of any old neighborhood, Malone thinks. He's convinced that if real estate developers could buy properties in the bottom levels of Dante's *Inferno* they'd rename it "LoHel" and start throwing up boutiques and condos.

Fifteen years ago, this stretch of Lenox was empty storefronts; now it's trendy again with new restaurants, bars and sidewalk cafés where the better-off locals come to eat, the white people come to feel hip and some of those condos in the new high-rise buildings go for two and a half mil.

All you need to know about this part of Harlem now, Malone thinks, is that there's a Banana Republic next to the Apollo Theater. There are the gods of place and the gods of commerce, and if you have to bet who's going to win out, put your money on money every time.

Farther uptown and in the projects it's still the ghetto.

Malone crosses 125th and passes the Red Rooster, where Ginny's Supper Club resides in the basement.

There are less famous shrines, nonetheless sacred to Malone.

He's attended funerals at Bailey's, bought pint bottles at Lenox Liquors, been stitched up in the E-room at Harlem Hospital, played hoops by the Big L mural in Fred Samuel Playground, ordered food through the bulletproof glass at Kennedy Fried Chicken. Parked along the street and watched the kids dance, smoked weed on a rooftop, watched the sun come up from Fort Tryon Park.

Now more dead gods, ancient gods—the old Savoy Ballroom, the site of the Cotton Club, both gone long before Malone's time, ghosts from the last Harlem Renaissance haunting this neighborhood with the image of what it once was and can never be again.

But Lenox is alive.

It actually throbs from the IRT subway line that runs directly underneath its entire length. Malone used to ride the #2 train, the one they called "The Beast" back then.

Now it's Black Star Music, the Mormon Church, African American Best Food. When they get to the end of Lenox, Malone says, "Go around the block."

Phil Russo, behind the wheel, turns left onto 147th and drives around the block, down Seventh Avenue and then another left onto 146th, and cruises past an abandoned tenement the owner gave back to the rats and the roaches, chasing the people out in the hope that some junkie cooking up will burn it down and he can collect the insurance and then sell the lot.

Win-win.

Malone scans for sentries or some cops cooping in a radio car, bagging a little sleep on the graveyard shift. A sole lookout stands outside the door. Green bandanna, green Nikes with green shoelaces make him a Trinitario.

Malone's crew has been watching the heroin mill on the second floor all summer. The Mexicans truck the smack up and deliver it to Diego Pena, the Dominican in charge of NYC. Pena breaks it down from kilos into dime bags and distributes it to the Domo gangs, the Trinitarios and DDP (Dominicans Don't Play), and then to the black and PR gangs in the projects.

The mill is fat tonight.

Fat with money.

Fat with dope.

"Gear up," Malone says, checking the Sig Sauer P226 in the holster on his hip. A Beretta 8000D Mini-Cougar rests in a second holster in the small of his back just below the new ceramic-plate vest.

He makes the whole crew wear vests on a job. Big Monty complains his is too tight, but Malone tells him it's a looser fit than a coffin. Bill Montague, a.k.a. Big Monty, is old school. On his head, even in summer, is his trademark trilby, with its stingy brim and a red feather on the left side. His concession to the heat is an XXXL guayabera shirt over khaki slacks. An unlit Montecristo cigar perches in the corner of his mouth.

A Mossberg 590 pump-action 12-gauge shotgun with a twenty-inch barrel loaded with powdered ceramic rounds sits at Phil Russo's feet by his high-polished red leather shoes with the skinny guinea toes. The shoes match his hair—Russo is that rare redheaded Italian and Malone jokes that there must have been a bogtrotter in the woodpile. Russo answers that's impossible because he isn't an alcoholic and he don't need a magnifying glass to find his own dick.

Billy O'Neill carries an HK MP5 submachine gun, two flashbang grenades and a roll of duct tape. Billy O's the youngest of the crew, but he has talent, street smarts and moves.

Guts, too.

Malone knows Billy ain't gonna cut and run, ain't gonna freeze or hesitate to pull the trigger, if he needs to. If anything, it's the opposite—Billy might be a little too quick to go. Got that Irish temper along with the Kennedy good looks. Got some other Kennedy-esque attributes, too. The kid likes women and women like him back.

Tonight, the crew is going in heavy.

And high.

You go up against narcos who are jacked on coke or speed, it helps to be pharmacologically even with them, so Malone pops two "go-pills"—Dexedrine. Then he slips on a blue windbreaker with NYPD stenciled in white and flips the lanyard with his shield over his chest.

Russo orbits the block again. Coming back around on 146th, he hits the gas, races up to the mill and slams the brakes. The lookout hears the tires squeal but turns around too late—Malone's out the door before the car stops. He shoves the lookout face-first into the wall and sticks the barrel of the Sig against his head.

"*Cállate, pendejo*," Malone says. "One sound, I'll splatter you."

He kicks the lookout's feet out from under him and puts him on the ground. Billy is already there—he duct-tapes the lookout's hands behind him and then slaps a strip over his mouth.

Malone's crew press themselves against the wall of the building. "We all stay sharp," Malone says, "we all go home tonight."

The Dex starts to kick in—Malone feels his heart race and his blood get hot.

It feels good.

He sends Billy O up to the roof to come down the fire escape and cover the window. The rest go in and head up the stairs. Malone first, the Sig in front of him, ready. Russo behind him with the shotgun, then Monty.

Malone don't worry about his back.

A wooden door blocks the top of the stairs.

Malone nods at Monty.

The big man steps up, jams the Rabbit between the door and the sill. Sweat pops on his forehead and runs down his dark skin as he presses the handles of the tool together and cracks the door open.

Malone steps through, swings his pistol in an arc, but no one's in the hallway. Looking to the right, he sees the new steel door at the end of the hall. *Machata* music plays from a radio inside, voices in Spanish, the whir of coffee grinders, the clack of a money counter.

And a dog barking.

Fuck, Malone thinks, all the narcos got 'em now. Just like every chick on the East Side has a yapping little Yorkie in her handbag these days, the slingers got pit bulls. It's a good idea—the spooks are scared shitless of dogs and the *chicas* working in the mills won't risk getting their faces chewed off for stealing.

Malone worries about Billy O because the kid loves dogs, even pit bulls. Malone learned this back in April when they hit a warehouse over by the river and three pit bulls were trying to jump through the chain-link fence to rip their throats out but Billy O, he just couldn't bring himself to pop them or let anyone else do it, so they had to go all the way around the back of the building, up the fire escape to the roof and then down the stairs.

It was a pain in the ass.

Anyway, the pit bull has made them but the Doms haven't. Malone hears one of them yell, "*Cállate!*" and then a sharp whack and the dog shuts up.

But the Hi-Guard steel security door is a problem.

The Rabbit ain't gonna crack it.

Malone gets on the radio. “Billy, you in place?”

“Born in place, bro.”

“We’re gonna blow the door,” Malone says. “When it goes, you toss in a flashbang.”

“You got it, D.”

Malone nods to Russo, who aims at the door’s hinges and fires two blasts. The ceramic powder explodes faster than the speed of sound and the door comes down.

Women, naked save for plastic gloves and hairnets, bolt for the window. Others crouch under tables as money-counting machines spit cash onto the floor like slot machines paying off with paper.

Malone yells, “NYPD!”

He sees Billy through the window to his left.

Doing exactly shit, just staring through the window. Jesus Christ, throw the grenade.

But Billy doesn’t.

The fuck’s he waiting for?

Then Malone sees it.

The pit bull’s got puppies, four of them, curled up in a ball behind her as she runs to the end of her metal chain, snapping and growling to protect them.

Billy doesn’t want to hurt the puppies.

Malone yells through the radio. “Goddamn it, do it!”

Billy looks through the window at him, then he kicks in the glass and lobs the grenade in.

But he throws it short, to avoid the goddamn dogs.

The concussion shatters the rest of the glass, spraying shards into Billy’s face and neck.

Bright, blinding white light—screams, yells.

Malone counts to three and goes in.

Chaos.

A Trini staggers, one hand to his blinded eyes, the other shooting a Glock as he moves toward the window and the fire escape. Malone hits him with two rounds in the chest and he topples into the window. A second gunman aims at Malone from beneath a counting table but Monty hits him with a blast from his .38 and then a second one to make sure he’s DOA.

They let the women get out the window.

“Billy, you okay?” Malone asks.

Billy O’s face looks like a Halloween mask.

Gashes on his arms and legs.

“I been cut worse in hockey games,” he says, laughing. “I’ll get stitched up when we’re done here.”

Money’s everywhere, in stacks, in the machines, spilled on the floor. Heroin is still in coffee grinders where it was being cut.

But that’s the small shit.

La caja—the trap—a large hole carved into the wall, is open.

Stacked, floor to ceiling, with bricks of heroin.

Diego Pena sits calmly at a table. If the deaths of two of his guys bother him, it doesn’t show on his face. “Do you have a warrant, Malone?”

“I heard a woman scream for help,” Malone says.

Pena smirks.

Well-dressed motherfucker. Gray Armani suit worth two large, the gold Piguet watch on his wrist five times that.

Pena notices. “It’s yours. I have three more.”

The pit bull barks wildly, straining against her chain.

Malone is looking at the heroin.

Stacks of it, vacuum wrapped in black plastic.

Enough H to keep the city high for weeks.

“I’ll save you the trouble of counting,” Pena says. “One hundred kilos even. Mexican cinnamon heroin—‘Dark Horse’—sixty percent pure. You can sell it for a hundred thousand dollars a kilo. The cash you’re seeing should amount to another five million. You take the drugs and the money. I get on a plane to the Dominican, you never see me again. Think about it—when’s the next time you can make fifteen million dollars for turning your back?”

And we all go home tonight, Malone thinks.

He says, “Take your gun out. Slow.”

Pena slowly reaches into his jacket for his pistol.

Malone shoots him twice in the heart.

Billy O squats and picks up a kilo. Slicing it open with his K-bar, he dips a small vial into the heroin, gets a pinch and dumps it into a plastic pouch he takes from his pocket. He crushes the vial inside the test bag and waits for the color to change.

It turns purple.

Billy grins. “We’re rich!”

Malone says, “Hurry the fuck up.”

There’s the sound of a pop as the pit bull breaks the chain and lunges toward him. Billy falls back, throwing the kilo into the air. It mushroom-clouds and then falls like a snow shower into his open wounds.

Another blast as Monty kills the dog.

But Billy’s flat on the floor. Malone sees him go rigid, then his legs start to spasm, jerking uncontrollably as the heroin speeds through his bloodstream.

His feet pound on the floor.

Malone kneels beside him, holds him in his arms.

“Billy, no,” Malone says. “Hold on.”

Billy looks up at him with empty eyes.

His face is white.

His spine jerks like an uncoiling spring.

Then he’s gone.

Freakin’ Billy, beautiful young Billy O, as old now as he’s ever gonna get.

Malone hears his own heart crack, and then dull explosions and at first he thinks he’s been shot, but he doesn’t see any wounds so then he thinks it’s his head blowing up.

Then he remembers.

It’s the Fourth of July.

PART 1

WHITE CHRISTMAS

Welcome to da jungle, this is my home,
The birth of the blues, the birth of the song.
—CHRIS THOMAS KING, “WELCOME TO DA JUNGLE”

CHAPTER 1

Harlem, New York City

Christmas Eve

Noon.

Denny Malone pops two go-pills and steps into the shower.

He just got up after a midnight-to-eight and needs the uppers to get him going. Tilting his face toward the showerhead, he lets the sharp needles sting his skin until it hurts.

He needs that, too.

Tired skin, tired eyes.

Tired soul.

Malone turns around and indulges in the hot water pounding on the back of his neck and shoulders. Running down the tattooed sleeves of his arms. It feels good, he could stand there all day, but he has things to do.

“Time to move, ace,” he tells himself.

You have responsibilities.

He gets out, dries off, wraps the towel around his waist.

Malone is six two and solid. Thirty-eight now, he knows he has a hard look to him. It’s the tats on the broad forearms, the heavy stubble even when he shaves, the short-cropped black hair, the don’t-fuck-with-me blue eyes.

It’s the broken nose, the small scar over the left side of his lip. What can’t be seen are the bigger scars on his right leg—his Medal of Valor scars for being stupid enough to get himself shot. That’s the NYPD, though, he thinks. They give you a medal for being stupid, take your badge for being smart.

Maybe the badass look helps him stay out of the physical confrontations, which he does try to avoid. For one thing, it’s more professional to talk your way through. For another, any fight is going to get you hurt—even if it’s just your knuckles—and he doesn’t like getting his clothes messed up rolling around in God only knows what nasty shit is down there on the concrete.

He’s not so much on the weights, so he hits the heavy bag and does the running, usually early morning or late afternoon depending on work, through Riverside Park because he likes the open view of the Hudson, Jersey across the river and the George Washington Bridge.

Now Malone goes into the small kitchen. There’s a little coffee left from when Claudette got up, and he pours a cup and puts it into the microwave.

She’s pulling a double at Harlem Hospital, just four blocks away on Lenox and 135th, so another nurse can spend time with family. With any luck, he’ll see her later tonight or early in the morning.

Malone doesn’t care that the coffee is stale and bitter. He’s not after a quality experience, just a caffeine kick to jump-start the Dexedrine. Can’t stand the whole gourmet coffee bullshit anyway, standing in line behind some millennial asshole taking ten minutes to order a perfect latte so he can take a selfie with it. Malone dumps in some cream and sugar, like most cops do. They drink too much of it, so the milk helps soothe their stomachs while the sugar gives them a boost.

An Upper West Side doctor writes Malone scrip for anything he wants—Dex, Vicodin, Xanax, antibiotics, whatever. A couple of years ago, the good doc—and he is a good guy, with a wife and three kids—had a little something on the side who decided to blackmail him when he decided to break it off.

Malone had a talk with the girl and explained things to her. Handed her a sealed envelope with \$10K and told her that was it. She should never contact the doc again or Malone would put her in the House of D where she’d be giving up her overvalued cooch for an extra spoonful of peanut butter.

Now the grateful doctor writes him scrip but half the time just gives him free samples. Every little bit helps, Malone thinks, and anyway, it's not like he could have speed or pain pills show up on his medical records if he got them through his insurance.

He doesn't want to phone Claudette and bother her at work, but texts to let her know that he didn't sleep through the alarm and to ask how her day is going. She texts back, Xmas crazy but OK. Yeah, Christmas Crazy.

Always crazy in New York, Malone thinks.

If it ain't Christmas Crazy, it's New Year's Eve Crazy (drunks), or Valentine's Day Crazy (domestic disputes skyrocket and the gays get into bar fights), St. Paddy's Crazy (drunk cops), Fourth of July Crazy, Labor Day Crazy. What we need is a holiday from the holidays. Just take a year off from any of them, see how it works out.

It probably wouldn't, he thinks.

Because you still got Everyday Crazy—Drunk Crazy, Junkie Crazy, Crack Crazy, Meth Crazy, Love Crazy, Hate Crazy and, Malone's personal favorite, plain old Crazy Crazy. What the public at large doesn't understand is that the city's jails have become its de facto mental hospitals and detox centers. Three-quarters of the prisoners they check in test positive for drugs or are psychotic, or both.

They belong in hospitals but don't have the insurance.

Malone goes into the bedroom to get dressed.

Black denim shirt, Levi's jeans, Doc Marten boots with steel-reinforced toes (the better to kick in doors), a black leather jacket. The quasi-official Irish-American New York street uniform, Staten Island division.

Malone grew up there, his wife and his kids still live there, and if you're Irish or Italian from Staten Island, your career choices are basically cop, fireman or crook. Malone took door number one, although he has a brother and two cousins who are firefighters.

Well, his brother, Liam, *was* a firefighter, until 9/11.

Now he's a twice-annual trip to Silver Lake Cemetery to leave flowers, a pint of Jameson's and a report on how the Rangers are doing.

Usually shitty.

They always used to joke that Liam was the black sheep of the family, becoming a "hose-monkey"—a firefighter—instead of a cop. Malone used to measure his brother's arms to see if they'd gotten any longer lugging all that shit around and Liam would shoot back that the only thing a cop would heft up a flight of stairs was a bag of doughnuts. And then there was the fictional competition between them about who could steal more—a firefighter on a domestic blaze or a cop on a burglary call.

Malone loved his little brother, looked after him all those nights the old man wasn't home, and they watched the Rangers together on Channel 11. The night the Rangers won the Stanley Cup in 1994 was one of the happiest nights in Malone's life. Him and Liam in front of the TV set, on their knees the last minute of the game when the Rangers were holding on to a one-goal lead by their fingernails and Craig MacTavish—God bless Craig MacTavish—kept getting the puck down deep in the Canucks' zone and time finally ran out and the Rangers won the series 4–3 and Denny and Liam hugged each other and jumped up and down.

And then Liam was gone, just like that, and it was Malone who had to go tell their mother. She was never the same after that and died just a year later. The doctors said it was cancer but Malone knew she was another victim of 9/11.

Now he clips his holster with the regulation Sig Sauer onto his belt.

A lot of cops like the shoulder holster but Malone thinks it's just an extra move to get your hand up there and he prefers his weapon where his hand already is. He clips his off-duty Beretta to the back of his waistband, where it nestles into the small of his back. The SOG knife goes into his right boot. It's against regs and illegal as shit, but Malone doesn't care. He could be in a situation

some skels take his guns and then what's he supposed to pull, his dick? He ain't going down like a bitch, he's going out slashing and stabbing.

And anyway, who's going to bust him?

A lot of people, you dumb donkey, he tells himself. These days, every cop's got a bull's-eye on his back.

Tough times for the NYPD.

First, there's the Michael Bennett shooting.

Michael Bennett was a fourteen-year-old black kid who was shot to death by an Anti-Crime cop in Brownsville. The classic case: nighttime, he looked hinky, the cop—a newbie named Hayes—told him to stop and he didn't. Bennett turned, reached into his waistband and pulled out what Hayes thought was a gun.

The newbie emptied his weapon into the kid.

Turned out it wasn't a gun, it was a cell phone.

The community, of course, was "outraged." Protests teetered on the edge of riots, the usual celebrity ministers, lawyers and social activists performed for the cameras, the city promised a complete investigation. Hayes was placed on administrative leave pending the result of the investigation, and the hostile relationship between blacks and the police got even worse than it already was.

The investigation is still "ongoing."

And it came behind the whole Ferguson thing, and Cleveland and Chicago, Freddie Gray down in Baltimore. Then there was Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Philando Castile in Minnesota, on and on.

Not that the NYPD didn't have its own cops killing unarmed black men—Sean Bell, Ousmane Zongo, George Tillman, Akai Gurley, David Felix, Eric Garner, Delrawn Small ... And now this rookie had to go and shoot young Michael Bennett.

So you got Black Lives Matter up your ass, every citizen a journalist with a cell-phone camera at the ready, and you go to work each day with the whole world thinking you're a murdering racist.

Okay, maybe not everybody, Malone admits, but it's definitely different now.

People look at you different.

Or shoot at you.

Five cops gunned down by a sniper in Dallas. Two cops in Las Vegas shot to death as they sat at a restaurant eating lunch. Forty-nine officers murdered in the United States in the past year. One of them, Paul Tuozzolo, in the NYPD, and the year before the Job lost Randy Holder and Brian Moore. There have been too many over the years. Malone knows the stats: 325 gunned down, 21 stabbed, 32 beaten to death, 21 deliberately run over by cars, 8 blown up in explosions, and none of that counts the guys dying from the shit they sucked down on 9/11.

So yeah, Malone carries something extra, and yeah, he thinks, there'd be any number of people ready to string you up, they found you with illegal weapons, not the least of which would be the cop-hating CCRB, which Phil Russo insists stands for "Cunts, Cocksuckers, Rats and Ballbusters," but is actually the Civilian Complaint Review Board, the mayor's chosen stick for beating up on his police force when he needs to deflect attention from his own scandals.

So the CCRB would hang you, Malone thinks, IAB—the goddamn Internal Affairs Bureau—would sure as shit hang you, even your own boss would cheerfully put a noose around your neck.

Now Malone sucks it up to call Sheila. What he doesn't want is a fight, what he doesn't want is the question, Where are you calling from? But that's what he gets when his estranged wife answers the phone. "Where are you calling from?"

"The city," Malone says.

To every Staten Islander, Manhattan is and will always be “the city.” He doesn’t get more specific than that, and fortunately she doesn’t press him on it. Instead she says, “This better not be a call telling me you can’t make it tomorrow. The kids will be—”

“No, I’m coming.”

“For presents?”

“I’ll get there early,” Malone says. “What’s a good time?”

“Seven thirty, eight.”

“Okay.”

“You on a midnight?” she asks, a tinge of suspicion in her tone.

“Yeah,” Malone says. Malone’s team is on the graveyard, but it’s a technicality—they work when they decide to work, which is when the cases tell them to. Drug dealers work regular shifts so their customers know when and where to find them, but drug *traffickers* work their own hours. “And it isn’t what you think.”

“What do I think?” Sheila knows that every cop with an IQ over 10 and a rank over rookie can get Christmas Eve off if he wants, and a midnight tour is usually just an excuse to get drunk with your buddies or bang some whore, or both.

“Don’t get it twisted, we’re working on something,” Malone says, “might break tonight.”

“Sure.”

Sarcastic, like. The hell she thinks pays for the presents, the kids’ braces, her spa days, her girls’ nights out? Every guy on the Job relies on overtime to pay the bills, maybe even get a little ahead. The wives, even the ones you’re separated from, gotta understand. You’re out there busting your hump, all the time.

“You spending Christmas Eve with her?” Sheila asks.

So close, Malone thinks, to getting away. And Sheila pronounces it “huh.” *You spending Christmas Eve with huh?*

“She’s working,” Malone says, dodging the question like a skel. “So am I.”

“You’re always working, Denny.”

Ain’t that the large truth, Malone thinks, taking that as a good-bye and clicking off. They’ll put it on my freakin’ headstone: *Denny Malone, he was always working*. Fuck it—you work, you die, you try to have a life somewhere in there.

But mostly you work.

A lot of guys, they come on the Job to do their twenty, pull the pin, get their pension. Malone, he’s on the Job because he loves the job.

Be honest, he tells himself as he walks out of the apartment. You had to do it all over again you wouldn’t be nothin’ but a New York City police detective.

The best job in the whole freakin’ world.

Malone pulls on a black wool beanie because it’s cold out there, locks up the apartment and goes down the stairs onto 136th. Claudette picked the place because it’s a short walk to her work, and near the Hansborough Rec Center, which has an indoor pool where she likes to swim.

“How can you swim in a public pool?” Malone has asked her. “I mean, the germs floating around in there. You’re a nurse.”

She laughed at him. “Do you have a private pool I don’t know about?”

He walks west on 136th out to Seventh Avenue, a.k.a. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard, past the Christian Science Church, United Fried Chicken and Café 22, where Claudette doesn’t like to eat because she’s afraid she’ll get fat and he doesn’t like to eat because he’s afraid they’ll spit in his food. Across the street is Judi’s, the little bar where he and Claudette will get a quiet drink on the odd occasions their downtimes coincide. Then he crosses ACP at 135th and walks past the Thurgood Marshall Academy and an IHOP where Small’s Paradise used to be down in the basement.

Claudette, who knows about these things, told Malone that Billie Holiday had her first audition there and that Malcolm X was a waiter there during World War II. Malone was more interested that Wilt Chamberlain owned the place for a while.

City blocks are memories.

They have lives and they have deaths.

Malone was still wearing the bag, riding a sector car, when a mook raped a little Haitian girl on this block back in the day. This was the fourth girl this animal had done, and every cop in the Three-Two was looking for him.

The Haitians got there before the cops did, found the perp still on the rooftop and tossed him off into the back alley.

Malone and his then partner caught the call and walked into the alley where Rocky the Non-Flying Squirrel was lying in a spreading pool of his own blood, with most of the bones in his body broken because nine floors is a long way to fall.

“That’s the man,” one of the local women told Malone at the edge of the alley. “The man who raped those little girls.”

The EMTs knew what was what, and one of them asked, “He dead yet?”

Malone shook his head and the EMTs lit up cigarettes and leaned on the ambulance smoking for a good ten minutes until they went in with a stretcher and came back out with the word to call the medical examiner.

The ME pronounced the cause of death as “massive blunt trauma with catastrophic and fatal bleeding,” and the Homicide guys who showed up accepted Malone’s account that the guy had jumped out of guilt over what he’d done.

The detectives wrote it off as a suicide, Malone got a lot of stroke from the Haitian community, and most important, no little girls had to testify in court with their rapist sitting there staring at them and some dirtbag defense attorney trying to make them look like liars.

It was a good result but shit, he thinks, we did that today we’d go to jail, we got caught.

He keeps walking south, past St. Nick’s.

A.k.a. “The Nickel.”

The St. Nicholas Houses, a baker’s dozen of fourteen-story buildings straddled by Adam Clayton Powell and Frederick Douglass Boulevards from 127th to 131st, make up a good part of Malone’s working life.

Yeah, Harlem has changed, Harlem has gentrified, but the projects are still the projects. They sit like desert islands in a sea of new prosperity and what makes the projects is what’s always made the projects—poverty, unemployment, drug slinging and gangs. Mostly good people inhabit St. Nick’s, Malone believes, trying to live their lives, raise their kids against tough odds, do their day-to-day, but you also have the hard-core thugs and the gangs.

Two gangs dominate action in St. Nick’s—the Get Money Boys and Black Spades. GMB has the north projects, the Spades the south, and they live in an uneasy peace enforced by DeVon Carter, who controls most of the drug trafficking in West Harlem.

The border between the gangs is 129th Street, and Malone walks past the basketball courts on the south side of the street.

The gang boys aren’t out there today, it’s too freakin’ cold.

He goes out Frederick Douglass past the Harlem Bar-B-Q and Greater Zion Hill Baptist. It was just down the street where he got the rep as both a “hero cop” and a “racist cop,” neither of which tag is true, Malone thinks.

It was what, six years ago now, he was working plainclothes out of the Three-Three and was having lunch at Manna’s when he heard screaming outside. He went out the door and saw people pointing at a deli across the street and down the block.

Malone called in a 10-61, pulled his weapon and went into the deli.

The robber grabbed a little girl and held a gun to her head.

The girl's mother was screaming.

"Drop your gun," the robber yelled at Malone, "or I'll kill her! I will!"

He was black, junkie-sick, out of his fucking mind.

Malone kept his gun aimed at him and said, "The fuck do I care you kill her? Just another nigger baby to me."

When the guy blinked, Malone put one through his head.

The mother ran forward and grabbed her little girl. Held her tight against her chest.

It was the first guy Malone ever killed.

A clean shooting, no trouble with the shooting board, although Malone had to ride a desk until it was cleared and had to go see the departmental shrink to find out if he had PTSD or something, which it turned out he didn't.

Only trouble was, the store clerk got the whole thing on his cell-phone camera and the *Daily News* ran with the headline JUST ANOTHER N*****R BABY TO ME with a photo of Malone with the log line "Hero Cop a Racist."

Malone got called into a meeting with his then captain, IAB and a PR flack from One Police, who asked, "Nigger baby?"

"I had to be sure he believed me."

"You couldn't have chosen different words?" the flack asked.

"I didn't have a speechwriter with me," Malone said.

"We'd like to put you up for a Medal of Valor," said his captain, "but ..."

"I wasn't going to put in for one."

To his credit, the IAB guy said, "May I point out that Sergeant Malone *saved* an African American life?"

"What if he'd missed?" the PR flack asked.

"I didn't," Malone said.

Truth was, though, he'd thought the same thing. Didn't tell it to the shrink, but he had nightmares about missing the skel and hitting the little girl.

Still does.

Shit, he even has nightmares about hitting the skel.

The clip ran on YouTube and a local rap group cut a song called "Just Another Nigger Baby," which got a few hundred thousand hits. But on the plus side, the little girl's mother came to the house with a pan of her special jalapeño cornbread and a handwritten thank-you card and sought Malone out.

He still has the card.

Now he crosses St. Nicholas and Convent and walks down 127th until it merges where 126th takes a northwest angle. He crosses Amsterdam and walks past Amsterdam Liquor Mart, which knows him well, Antioch Baptist Church, which doesn't, past St. Mary's Center and the Two-Six House and into the old building that now houses the Manhattan North Special Task Force.

Or, as it's known on the street, "Da Force."

CHAPTER 2

The Manhattan North Special Task Force was half Malone's idea to begin with.

A lot of bureaucratic verbiage describes their mission, but Malone and every other cop on Da Force know exactly what their "special task" is—

Hold the line.

Big Monty put it somewhat differently. "We're landscapers. Our job is to keep the jungle from growing back."

"The fuck are you talking about?" Russo asked.

"The old urban jungle that was Manhattan North has been mostly cut down," Monty said, "to make room for a cultivated, commercial Garden of Eden. But there are still patches of jungle—to wit, the projects. Our job is to keep the jungle from reclaiming paradise."

Malone knows the equation—real estate prices rise as crime falls—but he could give a shit about that.

His concern was the violence.

When Malone first came on the Job, the "Giuliani Miracle" had transformed the city. Police commissioners Ray Kelly and Bill Bratton had used "broken windows" theory and CompStat technology to reduce street crime to an almost negligible level.

Nine/eleven changed the department's focus from anticrime to antiterrorism, but street violence continued to fall, the murder rate plummeted and the Upper Manhattan "ghetto" neighborhoods of Harlem, Washington Heights and Inwood started to revive.

The crack epidemic had largely reached its tragic Darwinian conclusion, but the problems of poverty and unemployment—drug addiction, alcoholism, domestic violence and gangs—hadn't gone away.

To Malone, it was like there were two neighborhoods, two cultures grouped around their respective castles—the shiny new condo towers and the old project high-rises. The difference was that the people in power were now literally invested.

Back in the day, Harlem was Harlem, and rich white people "just didn't go there" unless they were slumming or looking for a cheap thrill. The murder rate was high, muggings and armed robberies and all the violence that came with drugs was high, but as long as blacks were raping, robbing and murdering other blacks, who gave a fuck?

Well, Malone.

Other cops.

That's the bitter, brutal irony about police work.

That's the root of the love-hate relationship cops have with the community and the community with the police.

The cops see it every day and every night.

The hurt, the dead.

People forget that the cops see first the victims and *then* the perpetrators. From the baby some crack whore dropped into the bathtub to the kid beat into stupefaction by his mother's eighteenth live-in boyfriend, the old lady whose hip gets broken when a purse snatcher knocks her to the sidewalk, the fifteen-year-old wannabe dope slinger gunned down on the corner.

The cops feel for the vics and hate the perps, but they can't feel too much or they can't do their jobs and they can't hate too much or they'll become the perps. So they develop a shell, a "we hate everybody" attitude force field around themselves that everyone can feel from ten feet away.

You gotta have it, Malone knows, or this job kills you, physically or psychologically. Or both.

So you feel for the old lady victim, but hate the mutt who did it; you sympathize with the storeowner who just got robbed, but despise the mope who robbed him; you feel bad for the black kid who got shot, but hate the nigger who shot him.

The real problem, Malone thinks, is when you start hating the victim, too. And you do—it just wears you down. Their pain becomes yours, the responsibility for their suffering weighs on your shoulders—you didn't do enough to protect them, you were in the wrong place, you didn't catch the perp earlier.

You start blaming yourself and/or you start blaming the victim—why are they so vulnerable, why so weak, why do they live in those conditions, why do they join gangs, sling drugs, why do they have to shoot each other over nothing ... why are they such fucking animals?

But Malone still fucking cares.

Doesn't want to.

But does.

Tenelli ain't happy.

"Why does this dick have to bring us in Christmas Eve?" she asks Malone as he comes through the doors.

"I think you answered your own question," Malone says.

Captain Sykes is a dick.

Speaking of dicks, the prevailing opinion is that Janice Tenelli has the biggest one on Da Force. Malone has watched the detective repeatedly kick a heavy bag right where the nuts would be and it made his own package shrivel.

Or expand. Tenelli has a mane of thick black hair, a won't-quit rack and a face straight out of an Italian movie. Every guy on Da Force would like to have sex with her, but she's made it very clear she don't shit where she eats.

All evidence to the contrary, Russo insists on insisting, to Tenelli's face, that the married mother of two is a lesbian.

"Because I won't fuck you?" she asked.

"Because it's my dearest-held fantasy," Russo said. "You and Flynn."

"Flynn is a lesbian."

"I know."

"Knock yourself out," Tenelli said, jerking her wrist.

"I haven't wrapped a single gift," she tells Malone now, "the in-laws are coming over tomorrow, I have to sit and listen to this guy make speeches? Come on, straighten him out, Denny."

She knows what they all know—Malone was here before Sykes came and he'll be here after he leaves. The joke is that Malone would take the lieutenant's exam except he couldn't take the pay cut.

"Sit and listen to his speech," Malone says, "then go home and make ... What are you making?"

"I dunno, Jack does all the cooking," she says. "Prime rib, I think. You doing your annual Turkey Run this year?"

"Hence the term 'annual.'"

"Right."

They're filing into the briefing room when Malone spots Kevin Callahan out of the corner of his eye. The undercover—tall, skinny, long red hair and beard—looks baked out of his mind.

Cops, undercover or otherwise, aren't supposed to do dope, but how else are they supposed to make buys and not get made? So sometimes it turns into a habit. A lot of guys come off undercover straight into rehab and their careers are fucked.

Occupational hazard.

Malone walks over, grabs Callahan by the elbow and walks him out the door. "Sykes sees you, he'll piss-test you straightaway."

"I have to log in."

“I’ll sign you out on a surveillance,” Malone says. “You get asked, you were up at the Ville for me.”

The Manhattan North Special Task Force house is conveniently located between two projects—Manhattanville, just across the street uptown, and Grant, across 125th Street below them.

Come the revolution, Malone thinks, we’re surrounded.

“Thanks, Denny.”

“Why are you still standing here?” Malone asks. “Get your ass up to the Ville. And, Callahan, you mess up again, I’ll piss you myself.”

He goes back in and takes a folding metal chair in the briefing room next to Russo.

Big Monty turns around in his chair and looks at them. He holds a steaming cup of tea, which he manages to sip even though his unlit cigar is jammed in the corner of his mouth. “I just want to enter my official protest regarding this afternoon’s activities.”

“Noted,” Malone says.

Monty turns back around.

Russo grins. “He ain’t happy.”

He is *unhappy*, Malone thinks, happily. It’s good to shake the otherwise unflappable Big Man up every once in a while.

Keeps him fresh.

Raf Torres walks in with his team—Gallina, Ortiz and Tenelli. Malone doesn’t like that Tenelli is with Torres, because he likes Tenelli and thinks that Torres is a piece of shit. He’s a big motherfucker, Torres, but to Malone he looks like a big, brown, pockmarked Puerto Rican toad.

Torres nods to Malone. It somehow manages to be a gesture of acknowledgment, respect and challenge at the same time.

Sykes walks in and stands behind the lectern like a professor. He’s young for a captain, but then again he has rabbis at the Puzzle Palace, brass looking out for his interests.

And he’s black.

Malone knows that Sykes has been tagged as the next big thing, and that the Manhattan North Special Task Force is a high-profile box for him to tick on his way up.

To Malone he looks like some precocious Republican Senate candidate—very crisp, very clean, his hair cut short. He sure as hell don’t have any tattoos, unless there’s an arrow pointing up his asshole reading *This Way to My Brain*.

That isn’t fair, Malone thinks, checking himself. The guy’s record is solid, he did some real police work on Major Crimes in Queens and then became the Job’s designated precinct janitor—he cleaned up the Tenth and the Seven-Six, real dumping grounds, and now they’ve moved him here.

To check another box on his sheet? Malone wonders.

Or to clean us up?

In either case, Sykes brought that Queens attitude with him.

Squared away, by the book.

A Queens Marine.

Sykes’s first day on command he had the whole Task Force—fifty-four detectives, undercovers, anticrime guys and uniforms—come in, sat them down and made a speech.

“I know I’m looking at the elite,” Sykes said. “The best of the best. I also know I’m looking at a few dirty cops. You know who you are. Soon, *I’ll* know who you are. And hear this—I catch any of you taking as much as a free coffee or a sandwich, I’ll have your shield and gun, I’ll have your pension. Now get out, go do your jobs.”

He didn’t make any friends, but he made it clear that he wasn’t there to make friends. And Sykes had also alienated his people by taking a vocal stand against “police brutality,” warning them he wouldn’t tolerate intimidation, beatings, profiling or stop and frisk.

How the fuck does he think we maintain even a semblance of control? Malone thinks, looking at the man now.

The captain holds up a copy of the *New York Times*.

“‘White Christmas,’” Sykes reads. “‘Heroin Floods the City on the Holidays.’ Mark Rubenstein in the *New York Times*. And not just one article, he’s doing a series. The *New York Times*, gentlemen.”

He pauses to let that sink in.

It doesn’t.

Most cops don’t read the *Times*. They read the *Daily News* and the *Post*, mostly for the sports news or the T&A on Page Six. A few read the *Wall Street Journal* to keep up on their portfolios. The *Times* is strictly for the suits at One Police and the hacks in the mayor’s office.

But the *Times* says there’s a “heroin epidemic,” Malone thinks.

Which is only an epidemic, of course, because now white people are dying.

Whites started to get opium-based pills from their physicians—oxycodone, Vicodin, that shit. But it was expensive and doctors were reluctant to prescribe too much for exactly the fear of addiction. So the white folks went to the open market and the pills became a street drug. It was all very nice and civilized until the Sinaloa Cartel down in Mexico made a corporate decision that it could undersell the big American pharmaceutical companies by raising production of its heroin, thereby reducing price.

As an incentive, they also increased its potency.

The addicted white Americans found that Mexican “cinnamon” heroin was cheaper and stronger than the pills and started shooting it into their veins and overdosing.

Malone literally saw it happening.

He and his team busted more bridge-and-tunnel junkies, suburban housewives and Upper East Side madonnas than they could count. More and more of the bodies they’d find slumped dead in alleys were Caucasian.

Which, according to the media, is a tragedy.

Even congressmen and senators pulled their noses out of their donors’ ass cracks long enough to notice the new epidemic and demand that “something has to be done about it.”

“I want you out there making heroin arrests,” Sykes says. “Our numbers on crack cocaine are satisfactory, but our numbers on heroin are subpar.”

The suits love their numbers, Malone thinks. This new “management” breed of cops are like the sabermetrics baseball people—they believe the numbers say it all. And when the numbers don’t say what they want them to, they massage them like Koreans on Eighth Avenue until they get a happy ending.

You want to look good? Violent crime is down.

You need more funding? It’s up.

You need arrests? Send your people out to make a bunch of bullshit busts that will never get convictions. You don’t care—convictions are the DA’s problem—you just want the arrest numbers.

You want to prove drugs are down in your sector? Send your guys on “search and avoid” missions where there aren’t any drugs.

That’s half the scam. The other way to manipulate the numbers is to let officers know they should downgrade charges from felonies to misdemeanors. So you call a straight-up robbery a “petit larceny,” a burglary becomes “lost property,” a rape a “sexual assault.”

Boom—crime is down.

Moneyball.

“There’s a heroin epidemic,” Sykes says, “and we’re on the front lines.”

They must have really cracked Inspector McGivern’s nuts at the CompStat meeting, Malone thinks, and he passed the pain along to Sykes.

So he hands it off to us.

And we'll pass it down to a bunch of low-level dealers, addicts who sell so they can score, and fill the house with a bunch of arrests so Central Booking will flow with puke from junkies jonesing, and bog down the court dockets with quivering losers pleading out and then going back to jail to score more smack. Come out still addicted, and start the whole cycle all over again.

But we'll make par.

The suits at One Police can say as much as they want that there are no quotas, but every guy on the Job knows there are. Back in the "broken windows" days, they were writing summonses for everything—loitering, littering, jumping a subway stile, double-parking. The theory was if you didn't come down on the small stuff, people would figure it was okay to do the big stuff.

So they were out there writing a lot of bullshit C-summonses, which forced a lot of poor people to take time off work they couldn't afford to go to court to pay fines they couldn't pay. Some just skipped their court days and got "no-show" warrants, so their misdemeanors escalated to felonies and they were looking at jail time for tossing a gum wrapper on the sidewalk.

It provoked a lot of anger toward the police.

Then there were the 250s.

The stop and frisks.

Which basically meant that if you saw a young black kid on the street, you stopped him and shook him down. It caused a lot of resentment, too, and got a lot of negative media, so we don't do that anymore, either.

Except we do.

Now the quota that isn't is heroin.

"Cooperation," Sykes is saying, "and coordination are what makes us a task force and not just separate entities officed in the same space. So let's work together, gentlemen, and get this thing done."

Rah fuckin' rah, Malone thinks.

Sykes probably doesn't realize that he's just given his people contradictory instructions—work their sources and make heroin arrests—doesn't even get that you work your sources by popping them with drugs and then *not* arresting them.

They give you information, you give them a pass.

That's the way it works.

What's he think, a dealer is going to talk to you out of the goodness of his heart, which he doesn't have anyway? To be a good citizen? A dealer talks to you for money or drugs, to skate on a charge or to fuck a rival dealer. Or maybe, *maybe*, because someone is fucking his bitch.

That's it.

The guys on Da Force don't look too much like cops. In fact, Malone thinks as he looks around, they look more like criminals.

The undercover look like junkies or dope slingers—hoodies, baggy pants or filthy jeans, sneakers. Malone's personal favorite, a black kid called Babyface, hides under a thick hood and sucks on a big pacifier as he looks up at Sykes, knowing the boss isn't going to say shit about it because Babyface brings home the bacon.

The plainclothes guys are urban pirates. They still have tin shields—not gold—under their black leather jackets, navy peacoats and down vests. Their jeans are clean but not creased, and they prefer Chelsea boots to tennis shoes.

Except "Cowboy" Bob Bartlett, who wears shitkicker boots with skinny toes, "the better to go up a black ass." Bartlett's never been farther west than Jersey City, but he affects a redneck drawl and aggravates the shit out of Malone by playing country-western "music" in the locker room.

The "uniforms" in their bags don't look like your run-of-the-mill cops either. It ain't what they wear, it's in their faces. They're badasses, with the smirks as pinned on as the badges on their chests. These boys are always ready to go, ready to dance, just for the fuck of it.

Even the women have attitudes. There ain't many of them on Da Force, but the ones who are take no prisoners. You got Tenelli and then there's Emma Flynn, a hard-drinking (Irish, go figure) party girl with the sexual voracity of a Roman empress. And they're all tough, with a healthy hatred in their hearts.

The detectives, though, the gold shields like Malone, Russo, Montague, Torres, Gallina, Ortiz, Tenelli, they're in a different league altogether, "the best of the best," decorated veterans with scores of major arrests under their belts.

The Task Force detectives aren't uniforms or plainclothes or undercovers.

They're kings.

Their kingdoms aren't fields and castles but city blocks and project towers. Tony Upper West Side neighborhoods and Harlem projects. They rule Broadway and West End, Amsterdam, Lenox, St. Nicholas and Adam Clayton Powell. Central Park and Riverside where Jamaican nannies push yuppies' kids in strollers and start-up entrepreneurs jog, and trash-strewn playgrounds where the gangbangers ball and sling dope.

We'd *better* rule, Malone thinks, with a strong hand, because our subjects are blacks and whites, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Haitians, Jamaicans, Italians, Irish, Jews, Chinese, Vietnamese, Koreans, who all hate each other and who, in the absence of kings, would kill each other more than they already do.

We rule over gangs—Crips and Bloods and Trinitarios and Latin Lords. Dominicans Don't Play, Broad Day Shooters, Gun Clappin' Goonies, Goons on Deck (seems to be a theme), From Da Zoo, Money Stackin' High, Mac Baller Brims. Folk Nation, Insane Gangster Crips, Addicted to Cash, Hot Boys, Get Money Boys.

Then there's the Italians—the Genovese family, the Lucheses, the Gambinos, the Ciminis—all of which would get *totally* out of control if they didn't know there were kings out there who would cut off their heads.

We rule Da Force, too. Sykes thinks he does, or at least pretends to think he does, but it's the detective kings who really call the shots. The undercovers are our spies, the uniforms our foot soldiers, the plainclothes our knights.

And we didn't become kings because our daddies were—we took our crowns the hard way, like the old warriors who fought their way to the throne with nicked swords and dented armor and wounds and scars. We started on these streets with guns and nightsticks and fists and nerve and guts and brains and balls. We came up through our hard-won street knowledge, our earned respect, our victories and even our defeats. We earned our reps as tough, strong, ruthless and fair rulers, administering rough justice with tempered mercy.

That's what a king does.

He hands down justice.

Malone knows it's important they look the part. Subjects expect their kings to look tight, to look sharp, to wear a little money on their backs and their feet, a little style. Take Montague, for instance. Big Monty dresses like an Ivy League professor—tweedy jackets, vests, knit ties—and the trilby with a small red feather in the band. It goes against the stereotype and it's scary because the skels don't know what to make of him, and when he gets them in the room, they think they're being interrogated by a genius.

Which Monty probably is.

Malone has seen him go into Morningside Park where the old black men play chess, contest five boards at a time and win every one of them.

Then give back the money he just took from them.

Which is also genius.

Russo, he's old school. Sports a long red-brown leather overcoat, a 1980s throwback that he wears well. Then again, Russo wears everything well, he's a sharp dresser. The retro overcoat, custom-tailored Italian suits, monogrammed shirts, Magli shoes.

A haircut every Friday, a shave twice a day.

Mobster chic, Russo's ironic comment on the wiseguys he grew up with and never wanted to be. He went the other way with it; as a cop, he likes to joke, he's the "white sheep of the family."

Malone always wears black.

His trademark.

All Da Force detectives are kings, but Malone—with no disrespect intended to our Lord and Savior—is the King of Kings.

Manhattan North is the Kingdom of Malone.

Like with any king, his subjects love him and fear him, revere him and loathe him, praise him and revile him. He has his loyalists and rivals, his sycophants and critics, his jesters and advisers, but he has no real friends.

Except his partners.

Russo and Monty.

His brother kings.

He would die for them.

"Malone? If you have a moment for me?"

It's Sykes.

CHAPTER 3

As I'm sure you know," Sykes says in his office, "just about everything I said in there was bullshit."

"Yes, sir," Malone says. "I was just wondering if *you* knew it."

Sykes's tight smile gets tighter, which Malone didn't think was possible.

The captain thinks that Malone is arrogant.

Malone doesn't argue with that.

A cop on these streets, he thinks, you'd better be arrogant. There are people up here, they see you don't think you're the shit, they will kill you. They'll cap you and fuck you in the entry wounds. Let Sykes go out on the streets, let him make the busts, go through the doors.

Sykes doesn't like it, but he doesn't like a lot about Detective Sergeant Dennis Malone—his sense of humor, his tat sleeves, his encyclopedic knowledge of hip-hop lyrics. He especially doesn't like Malone's attitude, which is basically that Manhattan North is his kingdom and his captain is just a tourist.

Fuck him, Malone thinks.

There's nothing Sykes can do because last July Malone and his team made the largest heroin bust in the history of New York City. They hit Diego Pena, the Dominican kingpin, for fifty kilos, enough to supply a fix for every man, woman and child in the city.

They also seized close to two million in cash.

The suits at One Police Plaza weren't thrilled that Malone and his team did the whole investigation on their own and didn't bring anyone else in. Narcotics was furious, DEA was pissed, too. But fuck 'em all, Malone thinks.

The media loved it.

The *Daily News* and the *Post* had full-color screaming headlines, every TV station led with it. Even the *Times* put a story in the Metro section.

So the suits had to grin and bear it.

Posed with the stacks of heroin.

The media also lifted its dress over its head in September when the Task Force made a major raid into the Grant and Manhattanville projects and busted over a hundred gangbangers from the 3Staccs, the Money Avenue Crew and the Make It Happen Boys, the latter of which youth-at-risk capped an eighteen-year-old star woman basketball player in retaliation for one of their own getting shot. She was on her knees in a stairwell begging for her life, pleading for the chance to go to that college where she had a full ride, but she didn't get it.

They left her on the landing, her blood dripping down the steps like a little crimson waterfall.

The papers were full of pictures of Malone and his team and the rest of the Task Force hauling her killers out of the projects and toward life without parole in Attica, known in the street as the Terror Dome.

So my team, Malone thinks, brings in three-quarters of the quality arrests in "your command"—serious arrests with serious weight that result in convictions with serious time. It doesn't show up in your numbers, but you know goddamn well that my team has made assists in just about every drug-related homicide arrest—resulting in conviction—not to mention muggings, burglaries, robberies, domestic assaults and rapes committed by junkies and dealers.

I've taken more real bad guys off the street than cancer, and it's my team that keeps the lid on this shithole, keeps it from exploding, and you know it.

So even though you're threatened by me, even though you know it's really me and not you that runs the Task Force, you ain't gonna reassign me because you need me to make you look good.

And you know that, too.

You may not like your best player, but you don't trade him. He puts points on the board. Sykes can't touch him.

Now the captain says, "That was a dog-and-pony show to satisfy the suits. Heroin makes headlines, we have to respond."

The fact is that heroin use in the black community is down, not up, Malone knows. The retail sale of heroin by black gangs is down, not up; in fact, the young bangers are diversifying into cell-phone theft and cybercrime—identity theft and credit card fraud.

Any cop in Brooklyn, the Bronx and Manhattan North knows that the violence isn't around heroin, it's about weed. The corner boys are fighting over who gets to sell peaceful marijuana, and where they get to sell it.

"If we can take down the heroin mills," Sykes says, "by all means, let's take them down. But what I really care about is the guns. What I really care about is stopping these young idiots from killing themselves and other people on my streets."

Guns and dope are the soup and sandwich of American crime. As much as the Job is obsessed with heroin, it's more obsessed with getting guns off the streets. And for good reason—it's the cops who have to deal with the murders, the wounded, cops who have to tell the families, work with them, try to get them some justice.

And, of course, it's guns on the street that kill cops.

The NRA assholes will tell you that "guns don't kill people, people do." Yeah, Malone thinks, people with guns.

Sure, you have stabbings, you have fatal beatings, but without guns the homicide figures would be negligible. And most of the congressional whores who go to their NRA meeting smelling nice and wearing something frilly have never seen a gunshot homicide or even a person who's been shot.

Cops have. Cops do.

It ain't pretty. It don't look or sound (or smell) anything like in the movies. These asshats who think that the answer is to arm everyone so they could, for instance, shoot it out in a dark theater have never had a gun pointed at them and would shit themselves if they did.

They say it's all about the Second Amendment and individual rights but what it's about is the money. The gun manufacturers, who make up the vast bulk of the NRA's funding, want to sell guns and make their cash.

End of motherfucking story.

New York City has the strictest gun laws in the country but that doesn't make any difference because all the guns come in from the outside, up the "Iron Pipeline." Dealers make straw purchases in states with weak gun laws—Texas, Arizona, Alabama, the Carolinas—and then bring them up I-95 to the cities of the Northeast and New England.

The goobers love to talk about crime in the big cities, Malone thinks, but either don't know or don't care that the guns come from their states.

To date, at least four New York cops have been killed with guns that came up the Iron Pipeline. Not to mention the corner boys and the bystanders.

The mayor's office, the department, everyone is desperate to get guns off the streets. The Job is even buying them back—a no-questions-asked cash-and-gift-card offer: you bring in your guns, we smile at you and give you \$200 bank cards for handguns and assault rifles and \$25 for rifles, shotguns and BB guns.

The last buyback, at the church over on 129th and Adam Clayton Powell, netted forty-eight revolvers, seventeen semiautomatic pistols, three rifles, a shotgun and an AR-15.

Malone has no problem with it. Guns off the streets are guns off the streets, and guns off the streets help a cop achieve job number one—go home at end of shift. One of the old hairbags taught him that when he first came on the Job—your first job is to go home at end of shift.

Now Sykes asks, "Where are we with DeVon Carter?"

DeVon Carter is the drug lord of Manhattan North, a.k.a. the Soul Survivor, the latest in a line of Harlem kingpins that came down from Bumpy Johnson, Frank Lucas and Nicky Barnes.

He makes most of his money through the heroin mills that are really distribution centers, shipping to New England, the small towns up the Hudson, or down to Philly, Baltimore and Washington.

Think Amazon for smack.

He's smart, he's strategic and he's insulated himself from the day-to-day operations. He never goes near the drugs or the sales, and all his communications are filtered through a handful of subordinates who go talk to him personally, never over the phone, text or e-mail.

Da Force hasn't been able to get a CI inside Carter's operation because the Soul Survivor only lets old friends and close family into his inner circle. And if they get busted, they choose doing the time over flipping on him, because doing the time means they're still alive.

It's frustrating—the Task Force could bust as many street-level dealers as they want. The undercovers do numerous buy-and-bust ops, but it's a revolving door, a few gangbangers go to Rikers and there are others in line to take their place slinging the dope.

But so far, Carter has been untouchable.

"We have CIs out on the street," Malone says, "sometime we get a twenty on him, but so what? Without a wiretap, we're fucked."

Carter owns or has pieces of a dozen clubs, bodegas, apartment buildings, boats and God knows what else and he spreads his meetings out. If they could get a wire into one of those places, they might get enough to move on him.

It's the classic vicious circle. Without probable cause, you can't get a warrant, but without the warrant, you can't get probable cause.

Malone doesn't bother saying this. Sykes already knows.

"Intel," Sykes says, "indicates that Carter is negotiating a major firearms purchase. Serious weapons—assault rifles, automatic pistols, even rocket launchers."

"Where are you getting this?"

"Despite your opinion," Sykes says, "you're not the only one who does police work out of this building. If Carter is looking for that kind of weaponry, it means he's going to war against the Dominicans."

"I agree."

"Good," Sykes says. "I don't want that war fought on my turf. I don't want to see that level of bloodshed. I want that shipment stopped."

Yeah, Malone thinks, you want it stopped, but you want it stopped your way—"no cowboy bullshit, no illegal wires, no booming, no dropping your own dime." He's heard the whole speech before.

"I grew up in Brooklyn," Sykes says. "In the Marcy projects."

Malone knows the story—it's been in the papers, paraded on the Job's website: "From the projects to the precinct—black officer fights his way from the gangs to the upper echelon of the NYPD." How Sykes turned his life around, got a scholarship to Brown, came home to "make a difference."

Malone ain't about to burst into tears.

But it has to be tough, being a black cop in a high position. Everyone looks at you different—to the people in the precinct you ain't quite black, to the cops in the house you ain't quite blue. Malone wonders which Sykes is to himself, or if he even knows. So, it's gotta be tough, especially these days, all the racial shit going down.

"I know what you think of me," Sykes says. "Empty suit. Token black careerist. 'Move on and move up'?"

"Pretty much, we're being honest, sir."

“The suits want to make Manhattan North safe for white money,” Sykes says. “I want to make it safe for black people. Is that honest enough for you?”

“Yeah, that’ll do.”

“I know you think you’re protected by the Pena bust, your other heroics, by McGivern and the Irish-Italian Club downtown at One Police,” Sykes says. “But let me tell you something, Malone; you have enemies down there just waiting for you to slip on the banana peel so they can walk all over you.”

“And you’re not.”

“Right now I need you,” Sykes says. “I need you and your team to keep DeVon Carter from turning my streets into a slaughterhouse. You do that for me, I’ll, yes, move on and move up and leave you with your little kingdom here. You don’t do that for me, you’re just a white pain in my black ass and I will have you moved so far from Manhattan North you’ll be wearing a fucking sombrero to work.”

Try it, motherfucker, Malone thinks.

Try it, see what happens.

The fucked-up part, though, is they both want the same thing. They don’t want those guns getting on the streets.

And they’re *my* streets, Malone thinks, not yours.

He says, “I can stop that shipment. I don’t know if I can stop that shipment by the book.”

So how bad do you want them stopped, Captain Sykes?

He sits there and watches Sykes consider his own deal with the devil.

Then Sykes says, “I want reports, Sergeant. And everything you report to me had better be by the book. I want to know where you are and what you’re doing there. Do we understand each other?”

Perfectly, Malone thinks.

We’re all corrupt.

Just each in our own way.

And it’s a peace offering—if this turns into a big bust, I bring you with me this time. You star in the movie, get your picture in the *Post*, a boost in your career. And no one gives a fuck about Manhattan North’s numbers until you’re up and out.

“Merry Christmas, Captain,” Malone says.

“Merry Christmas, Malone.”

CHAPTER 4

Malone started the Turkey Run, what, five years ago, when the Task Force came into being and he thought they needed a little positive PR in the neighborhood.

Everyone up here knows the detectives from Da Force anyway, and it doesn't hurt to spread a little love and goodwill toward men. You never know when some kid who ate turkey instead of going hungry on Christmas is going to decide to cut you a break, give you a tip.

It's a point of pride with Malone that the turkeys come out of his own pocket. Lou Savino and the wiseguys over on Pleasant Avenue would cheerfully donate turkeys that fell off the backs of trucks, but Malone knows the community would get wind of that right away. So he accepts a discount on the turkeys from a food wholesaler whose double-parked trucks don't get ticketed, but he pays the rest of the freight himself.

Shit, one decent bust more than makes up for it.

Malone doesn't kid himself that the same people who take his turkeys won't be dropping "airmail"—bottles, cans, dirty diapers—on him from the upper floors of the project buildings the day after tomorrow. One time someone dropped an entire air-conditioning unit from the nineteenth floor that missed Malone's head by about an inch.

Malone knows the Turkey Run is just a truce.

Now he goes down to the locker room where Big Monty is getting into the Santa costume.

Malone laughs. "You look good."

Well, actually ridiculous. A big black man, normally reserved and dignified, with a red Santa cap and a big beard. "A black Santa?"

"Diversity," Malone says. "I read it on the Job's website."

"Anyway," Russo says to Montague, "you're not Santa Claus, you're *Crack* Claus. Who would be black up here. And you got the belly."

Montague says, "Ain't my fault every time I fuck your wife she makes me a sandwich."

Russo laughs. "More than she makes me."

Used to be it was Billy O played Santa, even though he was skinnier than a rail. He freakin' loved it, shoving a pillow under the suit, joking with the kids, handing out the turkeys. Now it's fallen on Monty, even though he's black.

Monty adjusts the beard and looks at Malone. "You know they *sell* those turkeys. We might as well just cut out the middleman and hand them crack."

Malone knows every turkey ain't gonna make it to the table, that a lot of them will go straight to the pipe or into arms or up noses. Those turkeys will go to the dealers, who'll sell them to the bodegas, who'll put them on the shelves and make a profit. But most of the turkeys will make it home, and life is a numbers game. Some kids will get Christmas dinner because of his turkeys, others won't.

Has to be good enough.

DeVon Carter doesn't think it's even close to good enough. Carter, he laughed at Malone's Christmas Turkey Run.

This was a month or so ago.

Malone, Russo and Monty were having lunch at Sylvia's, each of them digging into some stewed turkey wings, when Monty looked up and said, "Guess who's here."

Malone glanced over at the bar and saw DeVon Carter.

Russo said, "You want to get the check and go?"

"No reason to be unfriendly," Malone said. "I think I'll slide over and say hello."

As Malone got up, two of Carter's guys moved to step in the way, but Carter waved them off. Malone took the stool next to Carter and said, "DeVon Carter, Denny Malone."

"I know who you are," Carter said. "Is there a problem?"

“Not unless you have one,” Malone said. “I just thought, hey, we’re in the same place, we might as well meet in person.”

Carter looked good, like he always does. Gray cashmere Brioni turtleneck sweater, charcoal Ralph Lauren slacks, large Gucci eyeglass frames.

It got a little quiet in the place. There was the biggest drug slinger in Harlem and the cop trying to bust him sitting down with each other. Carter said, “As a matter of fact, we were just laughing about you.”

“Yeah? What’s so funny about me?”

“Your ‘Turkey Run,’” Carter said. “You give the people drumsticks. I give them money and dope. Who do you think is going to win that one?”

“The real question,” Malone said, “is who’s going to win between you and the Doms?”

The Pena bust slowed the Dominicans down a little, but it was just a setback. Some of Carter’s gangs were starting to look at the Dominicans as an option. They’re afraid they’re outnumbered and outgunned and are going to lose the marijuana business.

So Carter is a polydrug merchandiser—he has to be. In addition to the smack that mostly leaves the city or at least goes to a mostly white customer base, he markets coke and marijuana as well, because to run his moneymaking heroin business he needs troops. He needs security, mules, communications people—he needs the gangs.

The gangs have to make money, they have to eat.

Carter doesn’t have a choice but to let “his” gangs deal weed—he has to, or the Dominicans will and they’ll take his business. They’ll either buy Carter’s gangs outright or just wipe them off the map, because without the weed money, the gangs couldn’t buy guns and they’d be helpless.

His pyramid would crumble from the bottom.

Malone wouldn’t care that much about the weed slinging except that 70 percent of the murders in Manhattan North are drug related.

So you have Latino gangs fighting each other, you have black gangs fighting each other and, increasingly, you have black gangs fighting Latino gangs as the battle between their big-money heroin bosses escalates.

“You took Pena off the count for me,” Carter said.

“And not as much as a muffin basket.”

“I heard you were well compensated.”

It sent a jolt up Malone’s spine but he didn’t flinch. “Every time there’s a big bust, the ‘community’ says the cops ripped some off the top.”

“That’s because every time they do.”

“Here’s what you don’t understand,” Malone said. “Young black men used to pick cotton—now you *are* the cotton. You’re the raw product that gets fed into the machine, thousands of you every day.”

“The prison-industrial complex,” Carter said. “I pay your salary.”

“Don’t think I’m not grateful,” Malone said. “But if it’s not you, it would be someone else. Why do you think they call you the ‘Soul Survivor’? Because you’re black and you’re isolated and you’re the last of your kind. Used to be, white politicians would come kiss your ass looking for your votes. You don’t see that so much anymore because they don’t need you. They’re sucking up to Latinos, Asians, the dotheads. Fuck, even the Muslims have more swag than you do. You’re on your way out.”

Carter smiled. “If I had a nickel for every time I heard that ...”

“You been to Pleasant Avenue lately?” Malone asked. “It’s *Chinese*. Inwood and the Heights? More Latinos every day. Your people in the Ville and Grant are starting to buy from the Doms; you’re even going to lose the Nickel soon. The Doms, the Mexicans, the PRs—they speak the same language, eat the same food, listen to the same music. They’ll sell to you, but partner with you? Forget it. The Mexicans give the local spics a wholesale price they don’t give you, and you just can’t compete, because a junkie ain’t got no loyalty to nothin’ but his arm.”

“You betting on the Domos?” Carter asked.

“I’m betting on me,” Malone said. “You know why? Because the machine keeps grinding.”

Later that day a basket of muffins arrived at Manhattan North for Malone with a note saying that it cost \$49.95, a nickel under the legal cost of a gift that a cop can accept.

Captain Sykes was not amused.

Now Malone rolls up Lenox, sitting in the back of a van with the doors open as Monty shouts, “Ho, ho, ho!,” while Malone tosses out turkeys with the benediction, “May Da Force be with you!”

The unit’s unofficial motto.

Which Sykes also don’t like because he thinks it’s “frivolous.” What the captain don’t understand is that being a cop up here is part show business. It’s not like they’re undercovers—they work with UCs, but undercovers don’t make busts.

We make busts, Malone thinks, and some of them get in the papers with our smiling faces and what Sykes don’t get is that we have to have a presence here. An image. And the image has to be that Da Force is *with* you, not against you.

Unless you’re slinging dope, assaulting people, raping women, doing drive-bys. Then Da Force is coming for your ass, and we’re going to get it.

One way or the other.

And the people up here know us anyway.

Yelling back, “Fuck Da Force,” “Give me my motherfucking turkey, motherfuckers,” “You pigs, why you ain’t giving out pork?” Malone just laughs, it’s just busting balls, and most of the people don’t say anything or just a quiet “Thank you.” Because most of the people here are good people, trying to make a living, raise their kids, like most everyone else.

Like Montague.

The big man carries too much on his shoulders, Malone thinks, living in the Savoy Apartments with a wife and three sons, the oldest almost that age when you keep him or lose him to the streets—and more and more Montague worries about spending too much time away from his boys. Like tonight, he wants to be home with his family on Christmas Eve, but instead he’s out making their college money, handling his business as a father.

Best thing a man can do for his kids—handle his motherfucking business.

And they’re good boys, Montague’s boys, Malone thinks. Smart, polite, respectful.

Malone is their “Uncle Denny.”

And their named legal guardian. Him and Sheila are the guardians to Monty’s kids *and* Russo’s kids, should something happen. If the Montagues and the Russos go out to dinner together, like they sometimes do, Malone jokes they shouldn’t ride in the same car so he doesn’t inherit six more kids.

Phil and Donna Russo are the named guardians for the Malone children. Denny and Sheila go down in a plane crash or something—an increasingly unlikely scenario—John and Caitlin go live with the Russos.

It isn’t that Malone don’t trust Montague—Monty might be the best father he’s ever seen and the kids love him—but Phil is his brother. Another Staten Island boy, he’s not only Malone’s partner, he’s his best friend. They grew up together, went through the Academy together. The slick guinea has saved Malone’s life more times than he can count and Malone has returned the favor.

He’d take a bullet for Russo.

For Monty, too.

Now a little kid, maybe eight, is giving Monty a hard time. “Santa don’t smoke no motherfuckin’ cigar.”

“This one does. And watch your mouth.”

“How come?”

“You want a turkey or not?” Monty asks. “Quit busting balls.”

“Santa don’t say ‘balls.’”

“Let Santa be, take your turkey.” The Reverend Cornelius Hampton walks up to the van and the crowd parts for him like the Red Sea he’s always preaching about in his “let my people go” sermons.

Malone looks at the famous face, the conked silver hair, the placid expression. Hampton is a community activist, a civil rights leader, a frequent guest on television talk shows, CNN and MSNBC.

Reverend Hampton has never seen a camera he didn’t like, Malone thinks. Hampton gets more airtime than Judge Judy.

Monty hands him a turkey. “For the church, Reverend.”

“Not *that* turkey,” Malone says. “This one.”

He reaches back and selects a bird, hands it to Hampton. “It’s fatter.”

Heavier, too, with the stuffing.

Twenty large in cash stuck up the turkey’s ass, this courtesy of Lou Savino, the Harlem capo for the Cimino family and the boys on Pleasant Avenue.

“Thank you, Sergeant Malone,” Hampton says. “This will go to feed the poor and the homeless.”

Yeah, Malone thinks, maybe some of it.

“Merry Christmas,” Hampton says.

“Merry Christmas.”

Malone spots Nasty Ass.

Junkie-bopping at the edge of the little parade, his long skinny neck tucked into the collar of the North Face down jacket Malone bought him so he don’t freeze to death out in the streets.

Nasty Ass is one of Malone’s CIs, a “criminal informant,” his special snitch, although Malone’s never filed a folder on him. A junkie and a small-time dealer, his info is usually good. Nasty Ass got his street name because he always smells like he has a round in the chamber. If you can, you want to talk to Nasty Ass in the open air.

Now he comes up to the back of the van, his thin frame shivering, because he’s either cold or jonesing. Malone hands him a turkey, although where the hell Nasty is going to cook it is a mystery, because the man usually flops out in shooting galleries.

Nasty Ass says, “218 One-Eight-Four. About eleven.”

“What’s he doing there?” Malone asks.

“Gettin’ his dick wet.”

“You know this for sure.”

“Dead ass. He told me hisself.”

“This pans out, it’s a payday for you,” Malone says. “And find a fuckin’ toilet, for Chrissakes, huh?”

“Merry Christmas,” Nasty Ass says.

He walks away with the turkey. Maybe he can sell it, Malone thinks, score a fix-up shot.

A man on the sidewalk yells, “I don’t want no cop turkey! Michael Bennett, he can’t eat no fucking turkey, can he!?”

Well, that’s true, Malone thinks.

That’s the cold truth.

Then he sees Marcus Sayer.

The boy’s face is swollen and purple, his bottom lip cut open as he asks for a turkey.

Marcus’s mother, a fat lazy idiot, opens the door a crack and sees the gold shield.

“Let me in, Lavelle,” Malone says. “I have a turkey for you.”

He does, he has a turkey under his arm and eight-year-old Marcus by the hand.

She slides the chain lock off and opens the door. “Is he in trouble? Marcus, what you do?”

Malone nudges Marcus in front of him and steps inside. He sets the turkey on the kitchen counter, or what he can see of it under the empty bottles, ashtrays and general filth.

“Where’s Dante?” Malone asks.

“Sleepin’.”

Malone pulls up Marcus's jacket and plaid shirt and shows her the welts on his back. "Dante do this?"

"What Marcus tell you?"

"He didn't tell me nothin'," Malone says.

Dante comes out of the bedroom. Lavelle's newest man is brolic, has to go six seven, all of it muscle and mean. He's drunk now, his eyes yellow and bloodshot, and he looms over Malone. "What you want?"

"What did I tell you I was going to do if you beat this boy again?"

"You was going to break my wrist."

Malone has the nightstick out and twirls it like a baton, bringing it down on Dante's right wrist, snapping it like a Popsicle stick. Dante bellows and swings with his left. Malone ducks, goes low and brings the stick across Dante's shins. The man goes down like a felled tree.

"So there you go," Malone says.

"This is police brutality."

Malone steps on Dante's neck and uses his other foot to kick him up the ass, hard, three times. "You see Al Sharpton here? Television crews? Lavelle here holding up a cell phone? There ain't no police brutality if the cameras aren't running."

"The boy disrespected me," Dante groans. "I disciplined him."

Marcus stands there wide-eyed; he's never seen big Dante get jacked up before and he kind of likes it. Lavelle, she just knows she's in for another ass-kicking when the cop leaves.

Malone steps down harder. "I see him with bruises again, I see him with welts, I'm going to discipline *you*. I'm going to shove this stick up your ass and pull it out your mouth. Then Big Monty and me are going to set your feet in cement and dump you in Jamaica Bay. Now get out. You don't live here anymore."

"You can't tell me where I can live!"

"I just did." Malone lets his foot off Dante's neck. "Why you still laying there, bitch?"

Dante gets up, holds his broken wrist and grimaces in pain.

Malone sees his coat and tosses it to him.

"What about my shoes?" Dante asks. "They in the bedroom."

"You go barefoot," Malone says. "You walk barefoot in the snow to the E-room and tell them what happens to grown men who beat up little boys."

Dante stumbles out the door.

Malone knows everyone will be talking about it tonight. The word will get passed—maybe you beat little kids in Brooklyn, in Queens, but not in Manhattan North, not in the Kingdom of Malone.

He turns to Lavelle. "What's wrong with you?"

"Don't I need love, too?"

"Love your kid," Malone says. "I see this again, you go to jail, he goes in the system. Is that what you want?"

"No."

"Then straighten up." He takes a twenty from his pocket. "This ain't for Little Debbies. There's still time for you to go shopping, put something under the tree."

"Ain't got a tree."

"It's an expression."

Jesus Christ.

He squats down in front of Marcus. "Anybody hurts you, anybody threatens to hurt you—you come to me, to Monty, Russo, anyone on Da Force. Okay?"

Marcus nods.

Yeah, maybe, Malone thinks. Maybe there's a chance the kid don't grow up hating every cop.

Malone's no fool—he knows he isn't going to stop every child beating in Manhattan North or even most of them. Or most of any other crime. And it bothers him—it's his turf, his responsibility. Everything that happens in Manhattan North is on him. He knows that isn't realistic either, but it's the way he feels.

Everything that happens in the kingdom is on the king.

He finds Lou Savino at D'Amore over on 116th in what they used to call Spanish Harlem.

Before that it was Italian Harlem.

Now it's on the way to becoming Asian Harlem.

Malone edges his way back to the bar.

Savino is a capo in the Cimino family with a crew based on the old Pleasant Avenue turf. They're into construction rackets, unions, shylocking, gambling—the usual mob shit—but Malone knows Lou also slings dope.

But not in Manhattan North.

Malone has assured him that if any of his shit ever shows up in the hood, all bets are off—it will blow back on his other businesses. It's pretty much always been the police deal with the mob—the wiseguys wanted to run hookers, to run gambling—card games, backroom casinos, the numbers racket before the state took it over, called it the lottery and made it a civic virtue—they gave a monthly envelope to the cops.

It was called the “pad.”

Usually one cop from every precinct was the bagman—he'd collect the payoff and distribute it out to his fellow officers. The patrolmen would kick up to the sergeants, the sergeants to the lieutenants, the lieutenants to the captains, the captains to the inspectors, the inspectors to the chiefs.

Everyone got a taste.

And most everybody considered it “clean money.”

Cops in those days (shit, Malone thinks, cops in these days) made a distinction between “clean money” and “dirty money.” Clean money was mostly from gambling; dirty money was from drugs and violent crimes—the rare occasions when a wiseguy would try to buy off a murder, an armed robbery, a rape or a violent assault. While almost every cop would take clean money, it was the rare one who took money that had drugs or blood on it.

Even the wiseguys knew the difference and accepted the fact that the same cop who'd take gambling money on Tuesday would arrest the same gangster on Thursday for dealing smack or committing a murder.

Everyone knew the rules.

Lou Savino is one of those mob guys who thinks he's at a wedding and doesn't realize it's actually a wake.

He prays at the altar of dead false gods.

Tries to hold up an image of what he thinks used to be but in fact didn't exist except maybe in the movies. The fuckin' guy wants so bad to be something that never was, even the ghost image of which is now fading into black.

The guys of Savino's generation liked what they saw in the movies and wanted to be *that*. So Lou ain't trying to be Lefty Ruggiero, he's trying to be Al Pacino being Lefty Ruggiero. He ain't trying to be Tommy DeSimone, he's going for Joe Pesci being Tommy DeSimone, not being Jake Amari but James Gandolfini.

Those were good shows, Malone thinks, but Jesus, Lou, they were *shows*. But people point to the spot a couple of blocks away from here where Sonny Corleone beat up Carlo Rizzi with a trash can lid like it really happened, not to the spot where Francis Ford Coppola filmed James Caan pretending to beat up Gianni Russo.

Yeah well, Malone thinks, every institution survives on its own mythology, the NYPD included.

Savino wears a black silk shirt under a pearl-gray Armani jacket and sits sipping a Seven and Seven. Why the hell anyone would dump soda into good whiskey is a mystery to Malone, but to each his own.

“Hey, it’s the cop *di tutti* cops!” Savino gets up and hugs him. The envelope slides effortlessly from Savino’s jacket into Malone’s. “Merry Christmas, Denny.”

Christmas is an important time in the wiseguy community—it’s when everyone gets their yearly bonuses, often in the tens of thousands of dollars. And the weight of the envelope is a barometer as to your standing in the crew—the heavier the envelope, the higher your status.

Malone’s envelope has nothing to do with that.

It’s for his services as a bagman.

Easy money—just meet a person here and there—a bar, a diner, the playground in Riverside Park—slip them an envelope. They already know what it’s for, it’s all been worked out; Malone is just the delivery guy because these good citizens don’t want to take a chance they’re seen with a known wiseguy.

They’re city officials—the kind who award contract bids.

That’s where the Cimino profit center is.

The Cimino *borgata* gets a piece of everything—a kickback from the contractor for getting him the bid, then the concrete, the rebar, the electrical, the plumbing. Otherwise, these unions find a problem and shut the project down.

Everyone thought the mob was done after RICO, Giuliani, the Commission case, the Windows case.

And they were.

Then the Towers came down.

Overnight, the feds shifted three-quarters of their personnel into antiterrorism and the mob made a comeback. Shit, they even made a fortune overcharging for debris removal from Ground Zero. Louie used to brag they took in sixty-three million.

Nine/eleven saved the Mafia.

It’s not clear now who’s in charge of the Cimino family, but the smart money is on Stevie Bruno. Did ten years on a RICO case, been out three now and is moving up fast. Very insulated, lives out in Jersey, rarely comes into the city, even for a meal.

So they’re back, although they’ll never be what they were.

Savino signals the bartender to get Malone a drink. The bartender already knows it’s a Jameson’s straight up.

They sit back down and go through the ritual dance—how’s the family, fine, how’s yours, all good, how’s business, you know another day another dollar behind, the usual bullshit.

“You touch the good reverend?” Savino asks.

“He got his turkey,” Malone says. “A couple of your people tuned up a bar owner on Lenox the other night, guy named Osborne.”

“What, you got a monopoly on beating up moolies?”

“Yeah, I do,” Malone says.

“He came up light on his vig,” Savino says. “Two weeks in a row.”

“Don’t show me up and do it on the street, where everyone sees,” Malone says. “Things are tense enough in the ‘community.’”

“Hey, just because one of your guys capped a kid means I gotta issue some kind of hall pass?” Savino asks. “This dumb shit bets on the Knicks. The *Knicks*, Denny. Then he don’t pay me my money. What am I supposed to do?”

“Just don’t do it on my beat.”

“Jesus fuck, Merry Christmas, I’m glad you came in tonight,” Savino says. “Anything else squeezing your shoes?”

“No, that’s it.”

“Thank you, St. Anthony.”

“You get a good envelope?”

Savino shrugs. “You want to know something ... you and me? The bosses these days, they’re cheap cocksuckers. This guy, he has a house in Jersey overlooks the river, a tennis court ... He barely comes into the city anymore. He did ten inside, okay, I get it ... but he thinks that means he gets to eat with both hands, no one minds. You know something? I mind.”

“Lou, shit, there are ears in here.”

“Fuck them,” Savino says. He orders another drink. “Here’s something might interest you, you know what I heard? I heard that maybe all the smack from that Pena bust made you a rock star didn’t make it to the evidence locker.”

Jesus Christ, is everyone talking about this? “Bullshit.”

“Yeah, probably,” Savino says. “Because it would have shown up on the street already, and it hasn’t. Someone went French Connection, I guess they’re sitting on it.”

“Yeah, well, don’t guess.”

“You’re fucking sensitive tonight,” Savino says. “I’m just saying, someone’s sitting on some weight, looking to lay it off ...”

Malone sets down his glass. “I gotta go.”

“Places to be, people to see,” Savino says. “*Buon Natale*, Malone.”

“Yeah, you too.”

Malone walks out onto the street. Jesus, what has Savino heard about the Pena bust? Was he just fishing, or did he know something? It’s not good, it’s going to have to be dealt with.

Anyway, Malone thinks, the wops won’t be beating up any deadbeat *ditzunes* out on Lenox.

So that’s something.

Next.

Debbie Phillips was three months pregnant when Billy O went down.

Because they weren’t married (*yet*—Monty and Russo were all over the kid to do the right thing and he was headed in that direction), the Job wouldn’t do shit for her. Didn’t give her any recognition at Billy’s funeral—the fucking Catholic department wouldn’t give the unwed mother the folded flag, the kind words, sure as shit no survivor’s benefits, no medical. She’d wanted to do a paternity test and then sue the Job, but Malone talked her out of it.

You don’t turn the Job over to lawyers.

“That’s not the way we do things,” he told her. “We’ll take care of you, the baby.”

“How?” Debbie asked.

“You let me worry about that,” Malone said. “Anything you need, you call me. If it’s a woman thing—Sheila, Donna Russo, Yolanda Montague.”

Debbie never reached out.

She was an independent type anyway, not really that attached to Billy, never mind his extended family. It was a one-night stand that went permanent, despite Malone’s constant warnings that Billy should double-wrap the groceries.

“I pulled out,” Billy told him when Debbie called with the news.

“What are you, in *high school*?” Malone asked.

Monty cuffed him in the head. “Idiot.”

“You going to marry her?” Russo asked.

“She don’t want to get married.”

“It doesn’t matter what you or she *wants*,” Monty said. “It only matters what that child *needs*—two parents.”

But Debbie, she’s one of those modern women doesn’t think she needs a man to raise a baby. Told Billy they should wait and see how their “relationship developed.”

Then they didn't get the chance.

Now, she opens the door for Malone, she's eight months and looks it. She's not getting any help from her family out in western Pennsylvania and she don't have anyone in New York. Yolanda Montague lives the closest so she checks in, brings groceries, goes to the doctor's appointments when Debbie will let her, but she don't deal with the money.

The wives never deal with the money.

"Merry Christmas, Debbie," Malone says.

"Yeah, okay."

She lets him in.

Debbie is pretty and petite, so her stomach looks huge on her. Her blond hair is stringy and dirty, the apartment is a mess. She sits down on the old sofa; the television is on to the evening news.

It's hot in the apartment, and stuffy, but it's always either too hot or too cold in these old apartments—no one can figure out the radiators. One of them hisses now, as if to tell Malone to fuck off if he doesn't like it.

He lays an envelope on the coffee table.

Five grand.

The decision was a no-brainer—Billy keeps drawing a full share, and when they lay off the Pena smack, he gets his share of that, too. Malone is the executor, he'll lay it out to Debbie as he sees she needs it and can handle it. The rest will go into a college fund for Billy's kid.

His son won't want for anything.

His mom can stay at home, take care of him.

Debbie fought him on this. "You can pay for day care. I need to work."

"No, you don't."

"It isn't just the money," she said. "I'd go crazy, all day here alone with a kid."

"You'll feel different once he's born."

"That's what they say."

Now she looks at the envelope and then up at him. "White welfare."

"It's not charity," Malone says. "It's Billy's money."

"Then give it to me," she says. "Instead of doling it out like Social Services."

"We take care of our own," Malone says. He looks around the small apartment. "Are you ready for this baby? You got, I dunno, a bassinette, diapers, a changing table?"

"Listen to you."

"Yolanda can take you shopping," Malone says. "Or if you want, we can just bring the stuff by."

"If Yolanda takes me shopping," Debbie says, "I'll look like some rich West Side bitch with a nanny. Maybe I can get her to speak in a Jamaican accent, or are they all Haitian now?"

She's bitter.

Malone don't blame her.

She has a fling with a cop, gets knocked up, the cop gets killed and there she is—alone with her life totally fucked up. Cops and their wives telling her what to do, giving her an allowance like she's a kid. But she is a kid, he thinks, and if I gave her Billy's full share in one whack, she'd blow it and where would Billy's son be?

"You have plans for tomorrow?" he asks.

"*It's a Wonderful Life*," she says. "The Montagues asked me, so did the Russos, but I don't want to intrude."

"They were sincere."

"I know." She puts her feet up on the table. "I miss him, Malone. Is that crazy?"

"No," Malone says. "It's not crazy."

I miss him, too.

I loved him, too.

The Dublin House, Seventy-Ninth and Broadway.

You go into an Irish bar on Christmas Eve, Malone thinks, what you're going to find are Irish drunks and Irish cops or some combination thereof.

He sees Bill McGivern standing at the crowded bar, knocking one back.

"Inspector?"

"Malone," McGivern says, "I was hoping to see you tonight. What are you drinking?"

"Same as you."

"Another Jameson's," McGivern says to the bartender. The inspector's cheeks are flushed, making his full head of white hair look even whiter. McGivern's one of those ruddy, full-faced, glad-handing, smiling Irishmen. A big player in the Emerald Society and Catholic Guardians. If he weren't a cop, he'd have been a ward healer, and a damn good one.

"You wanna get a booth?" Malone asks when the drink comes. They find one in the back and sit down.

"Merry Christmas, Malone."

"Merry Christmas, Inspector."

They touch glasses.

McGivern is Malone's "hook"—his mentor, protector, sponsor. Every cop with any kind of career has one—the guy who runs interference, gets you plum assignments, looks out for you.

And McGivern is a powerful hook. An NYPD inspector is two ranks higher than a captain and just below the chiefs. A well-placed inspector—and McGivern is—can kill a captain's career, and Sykes knows that.

Malone's known McGivern since he was a little boy. The inspector and Malone's father were in uniform together in the Six back in the day. It was McGivern talked to him a few years after his dad passed, explained a few things to him.

"John Malone was a great cop," McGivern said.

"He drank," Malone said. Yeah, he was sixteen, knew fucking everything.

"He did," McGivern said. "Your father and I, back in the Six, we caught eight murdered kids, all under four years of age, inside two weeks."

One of the children had all these little burn marks on his body, and McGivern and his dad couldn't figure out what they were until they finally realized they matched up exactly with the mouth of a crack pipe.

The child had been tortured and bitten his tongue off in pain.

"So, yes," McGivern said, "your father drank."

Now Malone takes an envelope from his jacket and slides it across the table. McGivern hefts the heavy envelope and says, "Merry Christmas, indeed."

"I had a good year."

McGivern shoves the envelope into his wool coat. "How's life treating you?"

Malone takes a sip of his whiskey and says, "Sykes is busting my hump."

"I can't get him transferred," McGivern says. "He's the darling of the Puzzle Palace."

One Police Plaza.

NYPD headquarters.

Which has troubles of its own right now, Malone thinks.

An FBI investigation of high-ranking officers taking gifts in exchange for favors.

Stupid shit like trips, Super Bowl tickets, gourmet meals at trendy restaurants in exchange for getting tickets fixed, building citations squashed, even guarding assholes bringing diamonds in from overseas. One of these rich fucks got one of the marine commanders to bring his friends out to Long Island on a police boat, and an air unit guy to fly his guests to a Hamptons party in a police chopper.

Then there's the thing with the gun licenses.

It's hard to get a gun permit in New York, especially a concealed carry license. It generally requires deep background checks and personal interviews. Unless you're rich and can lay out twenty grand to a "broker" and the "broker" bribes high-ranking cops to shortcut the process.

The feds have one of these brokers by the nuts and he's talking, naming names.

Indictments pending.

As it is, five chiefs have been relieved of duty already.

And one killed himself.

Drove to a street by a golf course near his house on Long Island and shot himself.

No note.

Genuine grief and shock waves have blasted through the upper rank of the NYPD, McGivern included.

They don't know who's next—to be arrested, to swallow the gun.

The media's humping it like a blind dog on a sofa leg, mostly because the mayor and the commissioner are at war.

Yeah, maybe not so much a war, Malone thinks, more like two guys on a sinking ship fighting for the last seat in the lifeboat. They're each facing down major scandals, and their one play is to throw each other to the media sharks and hope the feeding frenzy lasts long enough to paddle away.

Not enough bad things can happen to Hizzoner to make Malone happy, and most of his brother and sister cops share this opinion because the motherfucker throws them under the bus every chance he gets. Didn't back them on Garner, on Gurley, on Bennett. He knows where his votes come from, so he panders to the minority community and he's done everything but toss Black Lives Matter's collective salad.

But now his own ass is in a sling.

Turns out his administration has done some favors for major political donors. There's a shocker, Malone thinks. There's something new in this world, except the allegations claim that the mayor and his people took it a little further—threatening to actively harm potential donors who *didn't* contribute, and the New York state investigators pushing the case had an ugly word for it—extortion.

A lawyer word for "shakedown," which is an old New York tradition.

The mob did it for generations—probably still do in the few neighborhoods they still control—forcing shopkeepers and bar owners to make a weekly payment for "protection" against the theft and vandalism that would otherwise come.

The Job did it, too. Back in the day, every business owner on the block knew he'd better have an envelope ready for the beat cop on Friday, or, failing that, free sandwiches, free coffee, free drinks. From the hookers, free blow jobs, for that matter. In exchange, the cop took care of his block—checked the locks at night, moved the corner boys along.

The system worked.

And now Hizzoner is running his own shakedown for campaign funds and he's come out with an almost comical defense, offering to release a list of big donors that he *didn't* do favors for. There's talk of indictments, and of the 38,000 cops on the Job, about 37,999 have volunteered to show up with the cuffs.

Hizzoner would fire the commish, except it would look like what it is, so he needs an excuse, and any shit the mayor can throw on the Job, he's going to shovel with both hands.

And the commissioner, he'd be winning his fight against the mayor on points going away, if it weren't for this scandal ripping through One P. So he needs better news, he needs headlines.

Heroin busts and lower crime rates.

"The mission of the Manhattan North Special Task Force hasn't changed," McGivern is saying. "I don't care what Sykes tells you, you run the zoo any way you need to. I wouldn't want to be quoted on that, of course."

When Malone first went to McGivern and proposed a task force that would simultaneously address the guns and the violence, he didn't get as much resistance as he expected.

Homicide and Narcotics are separate units. Narcotics is its own division, run directly from One Police, and they usually don't mix. But with almost three-quarters of homicides being drug related, that didn't make sense, Malone argued. Same with a separate Gangs unit, because most of the drug violence was also gang violence.

Create a single force, he said, to attack them simultaneously.

Narcotics, Homicide, and Gangs screamed like stuck pigs. And it was true that elite units have stink on them in the NYPD.

Mostly because they've been prone to corruption and over-the-top violence.

The old Plainclothes Division back in the '60s and '70s gave rise to the Knapp Commission, which damn near destroyed the department. Frank Serpico was a naive asshole, Malone thinks—*everyone* knew you took money in Plainclothes. He went into the division anyway. He knew what he was getting into.

Guy had a Jesus complex.

No wonder that not a single officer in the NYPD donated blood after he was shot. Damn near destroyed the city, too. For twenty years after Knapp, the Job's priority was fighting corruption instead of crime.

Then it was the SIU—the Special Investigative Unit—given a free hand to operate at will throughout the city. Made some good busts, too, and made a lot of good money, ripping off dealers. They got caught, of course, and things cleaned up for a while.

The next elite unit was SCU—the Street Crimes Unit—whose principal task was to get the guns off the street that the Knapp Commission had allowed to get there in the first place. One hundred and thirty-eight cops, all white, so good at what they did that the Job expanded the unit by a factor of four and did it too fast.

The result was that on the night of February 4, 1999, when four SCU officers were patrolling the South Bronx, the senior man had been with the unit for only two years, the other three for three months. They had no supervisor with them, they didn't know each other, they didn't know the neighborhood.

So when Amadou Diallo looked like he was pulling a gun, one of the cops started firing and the others joined in.

"Contagious shooting," the experts call it.

The infamous forty-one shots.

SCU was disbanded.

The four cops were indicted, all were acquitted. Something the community remembered when Michael Bennett was shot.

But it's complicated—the fact is that SCU was effective in getting guns off the street, so more black people were probably killed as a result of the unit being disbanded than were shot by cops.

Ten years ago there was the predecessor to the Task Force—NMI, the Northern Manhattan Institute—forty-one detectives working narcotics in Harlem and Washington Heights. One of them ripped over \$800,000 from dealers; his partner came in second with \$740,000. The feds got them as collateral damage from a money-laundering sting. One of the cops got seven years, the other six. The unit commander got a year and change for taking his cut.

Puts a chill on everyone, seeing cops led out in cuffs.

But it doesn't stop it.

Seems about every twenty years there's a corruption scandal and a new commission.

So creating the Task Force was a hard sell.

It took time, influence and lobbying, but the Manhattan North Special Task Force was created.

The mission is simple—take back the streets.

Malone knows the unspoken agenda—we don't care what you do or how you do it (as long as it doesn't make the papers), just keep the animals in their cage.

"And what can I do for you, Denny?" McGivern asks now.

"We got a UC named Callahan," Malone says, "going down the rabbit hole. I'd like to get him pulled out before he hurts himself."

"Did you go to Sykes?"

"I don't want to hurt the kid," Malone says. "He's a good cop, he's just been under too long."

McGivern takes a pen from his jacket pocket and draws a circle on a cocktail napkin.

Then he put two dots inside the circle.

"These two dots, Denny, that's you and me. Inside the circle. You ask me to do a favor for you, that's inside the circle. This Callahan ..." He makes a dot outside the circle. "That's him. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Why am I asking a favor for someone outside the circle."

"This *once*, Denny," McGivern says. "But you need to understand that if it comes back on me, I drop it on you."

"Got it."

"There's an opening in Anti-Crime in the Two-Five," McGivern says. "I'll call Johnny over there, he owes me a favor, he'll take your kid."

"Thank you."

"We need more heroin arrests," McGivern says, getting up. "The chief of Narcotics is all over me. Make it snow, Denny. Give us a white Christmas."

He makes his way through the crowded bar, glad-handing and slapping shoulders on his way out the door.

Malone feels sad all of a sudden.

Maybe it's the adrenaline dump.

Maybe it's the Christmas blues.

He gets up and goes over to the jukebox, drops in some quarters and finds what he's looking for.

The Pogues' "Fairytale of New York."

A Christmas Eve tradition of Malone's.

It was Christmas Eve, babe, in the drunk tank,

An old man said to me, "Won't see another one."

Malone knows that Sykes is the bright-eyed boy down at Police Plaza, but he wonders exactly with who and how deep. Sykes is out to hurt him, no question.

But I'm a hero, Malone thinks, mocking himself.

Now at least half the cops in the bar start singing along with the chorus. They should be home with their families, those that still have them, but instead they're here, with their booze, their memories, with each other.

And the boys of the NYPD Choir were singing "Galway Bay"

And the bells are ringing out for Christmas Day.

It's a freezing night in Harlem.

Dumb cold.

The kind of cold where the dirty snow crunches under your feet and you can see your breath. It's after ten and not a lot of people on the street. Even most of the bodegas are closed, the heavy metal gates, graffiti-strewn, pulled down and the bars over the windows shut. A few cabs prowl for business, a couple of junkies move like ghosts.

The unmarked Crown Vic rolls north on Amsterdam and now they're not handing out turkeys, they're about to dish out the pain. Pain's nothing new to the people up here, it's a condition of life.

It's Christmas Eve and cold and clean and quiet.

Nobody's expecting anything to happen.

Which is what Malone's counting on, that Fat Teddy Bailey is fat, happy and complacent. Malone's been working for weeks with Nasty Ass to pin the midlevel smack dealer with shit on him when he's not expecting it.

Russo's singing.

You better not shout, you better not cry,

You better not pout, I'm tellin' you why.

Santa Smack is coming to town.

He turns right on 184th, where Nasty Ass said Fat Teddy would be coming to get his rocks off.

"Too cold for the lookouts," Malone says, because he doesn't see the usual kids and no one starts whistling to let anyone interested know that Da Force is on the street.

"Black people don't do cold," Monty says. "When's the last time you saw a brother on a ski slope?"

Fat Teddy's Caddy is parked outside 218.

"Nasty Ass, my *man*," Malone says.

He knows when you are sleeping.

He knows when you're awake.

He knows when you're just nodding out ...

"You want to take him now?" Monty asks.

"Let the guy get laid," Malone says. "It's Christmas."

"Ahh, Christmas Eve," Russo says as they sit in the car. "The eggnog spiked with rum, the presents under the tree, the wife just tipsy enough to give up *la fica*, and we sit here in the jungle freezing our asses off."

Malone pulls a flask out of his jacket pocket and hands it to him.

"I'm on duty," Russo says. He takes a long draw and hands the flask to the backseat. Big Monty takes a hit and passes it back to Malone.

They wait.

"How long can that fat fuck fuck?" Russo asks. "He take Viagra? I hope he didn't have a heart attack."

Malone gets out of the car.

Russo covers him as Malone squats beside Fat Teddy's Caddy and lets the air out of his left rear tire. Then they go back into the Crown Vic and wait for fifty more cold minutes.

Fat Teddy goes six three and two eighty. When he finally comes out, he looks like the Michelin man in his long North Face coat. He starts walking toward his car in his \$2,600 LeBron Air Force One basketball shoes with the satisfied swagger of a man who just got his rocks off.

Then he sees his tire. "Mothuh-fuckuh."

Fat Teddy opens the trunk, gets out the jack and bends over to start taking off the lug nuts.

He doesn't hear it coming.

Malone puts his pistol barrel behind Fat Teddy's ear. "Merry Christmas, Teddy. Ho, ho, motherfucking ho."

Russo holds his shotgun on the dealer as Monty starts to search the Caddy.

"Y'all some thirsty motherfuckers," Fat Teddy says. "Ain't you ever take a day off?"

"Does cancer take days off?" Malone pushes Fat Teddy up against the car and searches through the thick padding of the dealer's coat, relieving him of a .25 ACP. The dope slingers do love these weird-caliber weapons.

"Uh-oh," Malone says. "Convicted felon in possession of a concealed firearm. That's a pound zip-bit right there."

Five-year minimum sentence.

"It ain't mine," Fat Teddy says. "Why you stop me for? Walking while black?"

“Walking while *Teddy*,” Malone says. “I distinctly saw a bulge in your jacket that appeared to be a handgun.”

“You checkin’ out my *bulge*?” Fat Teddy asks. “You gone faggot on me right now, son?”

In response, Malone finds Fat Teddy’s cell phone, tosses it to the sidewalk and stomps on it.

“C’mon, son, that was a Six. You OD’d.”

“You have twenty of them,” Malone says. “Hands behind your back.”

“You ain’t takin’ me in,” Fat Teddy says tiredly, complying. “You ain’t gonna sit there filling out no DD-5’s on no Christmas fucking Eve. You got drinking to do, Irish. You got ‘ackahol’ to get to.”

Malone asks Monty, “Why is it your people cannot pronounce ‘alcohol’?”

“Don’t ‘acks’ me.” Monty reaches under the passenger seat and comes out with a sleeve of smack—a hundred glassine envelopes grouped in tens. “Oh, what have we here? Christmas at Rikers. You better bring mistletoe, Teddy, hope they let you kiss them on the mouth.”

“You flaked me.”

“I flaked your ass,” Malone says. “This is DeVon Carter’s heroin. He ain’t gonna be happy you lost it.”

“You need to talk to your people,” Fat Teddy says.

“Which people?” Malone slaps him in the face. “Who?”

Fat Teddy shuts up.

Malone says, “I’ll hang a snitch tag on you at Central Booking. You won’t make it out of Rikers.”

“You do that to me, man?” Fat Teddy asks.

“You’re either on my bus or under it.”

“All I know,” Fat Teddy says, “is that Carter said he had protection in Manhattan North. I thought it was you guys.”

“Well, it ain’t.”

Malone is *pissed*. Either Teddy is blowing smoke or someone in Manhattan North is on Carter’s pad. “What else you got on you?”

“Nothin’.”

Malone digs into his coat and comes out with rolls of cash wrapped in elastic bands. “This nothin’? Has to be thirty grand here, that’s some serious guap. Loyal customer rebate from Mickey D’s?”

“I eat *Five Guys*, motherfucker. Mickey D’s.”

“Well, you’re eating bologna tonight.”

“Come on, Malone,” Fat Teddy says.

“Tell you what,” Malone says, “we’ll just confiscate the contraband, cut you loose. Call it a Christmas present.”

It ain’t an offer, it’s a threat.

Teddy says, “You take my shit, you gotta arrest me, give me a five!”

Fat Teddy needs the arrest report to show Carter as proof the cops took it and he didn’t just rip him off. SOP—you get busted, you better have a DD-5 to show or you’re gonna get your fingers cut off.

Carter has done it.

The legend is he has one of those office paper cutters, and slingers who don’t have his dope, his money or a 5 get their hand laid in there and then *whomp*—no fingers.

Except it ain’t a rumor.

Malone found a guy staggering on the street one night, dripping blood all over the sidewalk. Carter left him with his thumb, though, so when he pointed the blame, he had no one to point at but himself.

They leave Teddy sitting against his car and go back to the Crown Vic. Malone cuts the cash up five ways, one for each of them, one share for expenses, and one piece for Billy O. Each guy puts his cash in a self-addressed envelope they always carry.

Then they go back and get Teddy.

“What about my ride, man?” Fat Teddy asks as they haul him to his feet. “You ain’t gonna take that, are you?”

“You had smack in it, asshole,” Russo says. “It is now property of the NYPD.”

“You mean property of Russo,” Fat Teddy says. “You ain’t drivin’ my Caddy out the Jersey Shore with that smelly guinea fish in it.”

“I wouldn’t be caught dead in this coonmobile,” Russo says. “It’s going to the pound.”

“It’s Christmas!” Fat Teddy whines.

Malone juts his chin toward the building. “What’s her number?”

Fat Teddy tells him. Malone punches the number and holds his phone up to Fat Teddy’s mouth.

“Baby, get down here,” Fat Teddy says. “Take care my car. And it better be here when I get out. And detailed.”

Russo leaves Fat Teddy’s keys on the hood and they haul him toward their car.

“Who dined me?” Fat Teddy asks. “It was that grimy little bitch Nasty Ass?”

“You wanna be one of those Christmas Eve suicides?” Malone asks. “Jumps off the GW Bridge? Because we can make that happen for you.”

Fat Teddy starts in on Monty. “Workin’ for the man, brothuh? You they house nigger?”

Monty slaps him across the face. Fat Teddy is big, but his head snaps back like a tetherball. “I’m a black man, you grape-soda-drinking, bitch-beating, smack-slinging projects monkey.”

“Motherfucker, I didn’t have these cuffs on—”

“You want to take it there?” Monty says. He drops his cigar in the street and grinds it with his heel. “Come on, just you and me.”

Fat Teddy don’t say nothin’.

“That’s what I thought,” Monty says.

On the way to the Three-Two they stop at a mailbox and put in the envelopes. Then they take Fat Teddy in and book him on the gun and the heroin. The desk sergeant is less than thrilled. “It’s Christmas Eve. Task Force assholes.”

“May Da Force be with you,” Malone says.

I’m dreaming of a white Christmas,

Just like the ones I used to know ...

Russo drives down Broadway toward the Upper West Side.

“Who was Fat Teddy talking about?” Russo asks. “Was he just mouthing, or does Carter have someone on the pad?”

“Has to be Torres.”

Torres is a wrong guy.

Does rips, sells cases, even runs whores, low-end crack addicts, mostly, and runaways. He works them hard. Keeps them in line with a car radio antenna—Malone has seen the welts.

The sergeant’s a real thumper, has a well-earned reputation for brutality, even by Manhattan North standards. Malone does what he can to keep Torres sweet. They’re all Task Force, after all, and have to get along.

But Malone can’t have lowlifes like Fat Teddy Bailey telling him he’s protected, so he’s going to have to work something out with Torres.

If it’s even true.

If it’s even Torres.

Russo pulls off at Eighty-Seventh and finds a parking space across the street from a brownstone at 349.

Malone rents the apartment from a Realtor they protect.

The rent is zero.

It's a small pied-à-terre, but it suits their purposes. A bedroom to crash in or take a girl, a sitting room and a little kitchen, a place to take a shower.

Or hide dope, because in the shower stall there's a false platform with a loose tile under which they stored the fifty kilos they ripped from the late, unlamented Diego Pena.

They're waiting to lay it off. Fifty kilos is enough to make an impact on the street, cause a stir, even lower prices, so they have to let the Pena rip fade before they bring it out. The heroin has a street value of five million dollars, but the cops will have to lay it off at a discount to a trusted fence. Still, it's a huge score, even split four ways.

Malone has no problem letting it all sit.

The largest score they've ever made or are ever likely to make, it's their security, their 401(k)'s, their futures. It's their kids' college tuitions, a wall against catastrophic illness, the difference between retiring in a Tucson trailer park or a West Palm condo. They cut up the three million in cash right away, with Malone's warning that no one should go out on a spending spree—buy a new car, a lot of jewelry for the wife, a boat, a trip to the Bahamas.

That's what the Internal Affairs pricks look for—a change in lifestyle, work habits, attitude. Put the money away, Malone told his guys. Stash at least \$50K where you can lay your hands on it inside an hour, in case IAB comes and you have to go on the lam. Another fifty for bail money if you didn't get out in time. Otherwise, spend a little, put the rest away, do your twenty, pull the pin, have a life.

They've even talked about retiring right now. Spacing it a few months apart, but quitting while they're ahead. Maybe we should, Malone thinks now, but coming so close after the Pena rip, it would raise suspicions.

He can see the headline now: HERO COPS QUIT AFTER BIGGEST BUST.

IAB would come for sure.

Malone and Russo go into the sitting room and Malone grabs a bottle of Jameson's from behind the little bar and pours each of them two fingers into squat whiskey glasses.

Red hair, tall, wiry, Russo looks about as Italian as a ham sandwich with mayonnaise. Malone looks more Italian, and they used to joke when they were kids that maybe they got switched at the hospital.

And the truth is Malone probably knows Russo better than he knows himself, mostly because he keeps everything *to* himself and Russo don't. If it's on Russo's mind, it's going to come out his mouth—not to everybody, just to his brother cops.

First time he had sex with Donna, classic prom night shit, Russo didn't even have to say it the next day, it was written all over his goofy face, just like his heart was on his sleeve.

"I love her, Denny," he said. "I'm gonna marry her."

"The fuck are you, Irish?" Denny asked. "You guys don't have to get married just because you did it."

"No, I want to," Russo said.

Russo's always known who he was. A lot of guys, they wanted to get out of Staten Island, be something else. Not Russo, he knew he was going to marry Donna, have kids, live in the old neighborhood, and he was happy with being an East Shore stereotype—cop in the city, wife, kids, three-bedroom house, one and a half baths, cookouts on the holidays.

They took the exam together, joined the department together, went to the Academy together. Malone, he had to help Russo gain five pounds to make the minimum weight—force-fed him milkshakes, beer and hoagies.

Even still, Russo wouldn't have gotten through without Malone. Russo could hit anything on the target range but he couldn't fight for shit. He was always that way, even when they were playing hockey, Russo had soft hands that could tip a puck into the net, and he'd drop the gloves but then it

was a catastrophe, even with his long arms, and Malone would have to come in and bail him out. So in the hand-to-hand PT at the Academy, they usually worked it out to get partnered up and Malone would let Russo flip him, get him into wristlocks and choke holds.

The day they graduated—will Malone ever forget the day they graduated?—Russo, he had this shit-eating grin he couldn't wipe off his face for nothing, and they looked at each other and knew what their lives were going to be.

When Sheila pissed two blue lines, it was Russo that Malone went to first, Russo who told him there were no questions, only one right answer and he wanted to be best man.

"That's old-school shit," Malone said. "That was our parents, our grandparents, it don't necessarily work that way anymore."

"The fuck it don't," Russo said. "We *are* old school, Denny, we're East Shore Staten Island. You may think you're modern and shit, but you ain't. Neither is Sheila. What, don't you love her?"

"I dunno."

"You loved her enough to fuck her," Russo said. "I know you, Denny, you can't be one of them jackoff absentee father sperm donors. That's not you."

So Russo was his best man.

Malone learned to love Sheila.

It wasn't so hard—she was pretty, funny, smart in her way, it was good for a long time.

He and Russo were still in bags—uniforms—when the Towers came down. Russo, he ran *toward* those buildings, not away, because he knew who he was. And that night, when Malone learned Liam was under Tower Two and was never coming back up, it was Russo who sat with him all night.

Just like Malone sat with Russo when Donna miscarried.

Russo cried.

When Russo's daughter, Sophia, was born premature, two pounds something and the doctors said it was touch-and-go, Malone sat in the hospital with him all night, saying nothing, just sitting, until Sophia was out of the woods.

The night Malone was stupid enough to get himself shot, running too far out in front to tackle a B&E perp, if it wasn't for Russo that night, the Job would have given Malone an inspector's funeral and Sheila a folded flag. They'd have played the bagpipes and had a wake and Sheila could have been a widow instead of a divorcée, if Russo hadn't shot the perp and driven the car to the E-room like he stole it, because Malone was bleeding out internally.

No, Phil put two in the perp's chest and a third in the head because that's the code—a cop shooter dies on the scene or in the "bus" on a slow ride to the hospital, with detours if necessary and the most possible potholes.

Doctors take the Hippocratic oath—EMTs don't. They know that if they take extraordinary measures to save a cop shooter's life, the next time they call for backup it might be slow getting there.

But Russo hadn't waited for the EMTs that night. He raced Malone to the hospital and carried him in like a baby.

Saved his life.

But that's Russo.

Stand-up, old-school guy with a Grill Master apron, an unaccountable taste for Nirvana, Pearl Jam and Nine Inch Nails, smarter than shit, clanging fucking balls, loyal like a dog, be there for you anywhere anytime Phil Russo.

A cop's cop.

A brother.

"You ever think we should quit?" Malone asks.

"The Job?"

Malone shakes his head. "The other shit. I mean, how much more do we need to earn?"

"I have three kids," Russo says. "You have two, Monty three. All smart. You know what college costs these days? They're worse than the Gambinos, they get their hooks in you. I don't know about you, I need to keep earning."

So do you, Malone tells himself.

You need the money, the cash flow, but it's more than that, admit it. You love the game. The thrill, the taking off the bad guys, even the danger, the idea that you might get caught.

You're a sick bastard.

"Maybe it's time we moved the Pena smack," Russo is saying.

"What, you need money?"

"No, I'm good," Russo says. "It's just that, you know, things have cooled down, it's just sitting there not earning. That's retirement money, Denny. That's 'fuck you I'm out of here' money. Survival money, anything should happen."

"You expecting something to happen, Phil?" Malone asks. "You know something I don't?"

"No."

"It's a big step," Malone says. "We took money before, we never dealt."

"Then why did we take it if we weren't going to sell it?"

"It makes us dope slingers," Malone says. "We been fighting these guys our whole careers, now we'll be just like them."

"If we'd turned it all in," Russo says, "someone else would have taken it."

"I know."

"Why not us?" Russo asks. "Why does everyone else get rich? The wiseguys, the dope dealers, the politicians? Why not us for a change? When is it our turn?"

"I hear you," Malone says.

They sit quietly and drink.

"Something else bothering you?" Russo asks him.

"I dunno," Malone says. "Maybe it's just Christmas, you know?"

"You going over there?" Russo asks.

"In the morning, open presents."

"Well, that'll be good."

"Yeah, that'll be good," Malone says.

"Swing by the house, you get a chance," Russo says. "Donna's going full guinea—macaroni with gravy, the *baccalata*, then the turkey."

"Thanks, I'll try."

Malone drives up to Manhattan North, asks the desk sergeant, "Fat Teddy get on the bus yet?"

"It's Christmas Eve, Malone," the sergeant says. "Things are backed up."

Malone goes down to the holding cells where Teddy sits on a bench. If there's any place more depressing on Christmas Eve than a holding cell, Malone doesn't know about it. Fat Teddy looks up when he sees Malone. "You gotta do something for me, bruvah."

"What are you going to do for me?"

"Like what?"

"Tell me who's on Carter's pad."

Teddy laughs. "Like you don't know."

"Torres?"

"I ain't know nothin'."

There it is, Malone thinks. Fat Teddy is scared to rat on a cop.

"Okay," Malone says. "Teddy, you're not an idiot, you only play one on the street. You know with two convictions on your sheet, the gun alone, you're going to do five. We trace it back to some straw purchase in Gooberville, the judge is going to be pissed, could throw you a double. Ten years, that's a long time, but look, I'll come visit, bring you ribs from Sweet Mama's."

“Don’t be clowning me, Malone.”

“Dead-ass serious,” Malone says. “What if I could get you a walk?”

“What if you had a dick ’stead of what you got?”

“You’re the one wanted to be serious, Teddy,” Malone says. “If you don’t ...”

“What you want?”

Malone says, “I’m hearing that Carter has been negotiating for some serious weaponry. What I want to know is, who is he negotiating with.”

“You think I’m stupid?”

“Not at all.”

“No, you must, Malone,” Teddy says, “because if I get a walk and you bust them guns, Carter he puts that together and I end up facedown.”

“You think *I*’m stupid, Teddy? I work out the walk so it looks like business as usual.”

Fat Teddy hesitates.

“Fuck you,” Malone says. “I have a beautiful woman waiting, I’m sitting here with an ugly fat guy.”

“His name is Mantell.”

“Whose name is Mantell?”

“Cracker runs guns for the ECMF.”

Malone knows the East Coast Motherfuckers are a motorcycle club deep in weed and weapons. Affiliate chapters in Georgia and the Carolinas. But they’re racist, white supremacists. “ECMF would do business with black?”

“I guess black money spend the same,” Fat Teddy shrugs. “And they don’t mind helping black kill black.”

What Malone is more surprised about is Carter doing business with white. He has to be desperate. “What can the bikers offer him?”

“AKs, ARs, MAC-10s, you name it,” Teddy says. “S’all I know, son.”

“Carter didn’t get you a lawyer?”

“Can’t get hold of Carter,” Teddy says. “He in the Bahamas.”

“Call this guy,” Malone says, handing him a card. “Mark Piccone. He’ll get it squared away for you.”

Teddy takes the card.

Malone gets up. “We’re doing something wrong, aren’t we, Teddy? You and me freezing our asses off, Carter sipping piña coladas on the beach?”

“Trill.”

Trill.

True and real.

Malone cruises in his unmarked work car.

There’s only so many places the snitch can be. Nasty prefers the area just north of Columbia but below 125th Street and Malone finds him skulking along the east side of Broadway, doing the junkie bop.

Pulling over, Malone rolls down the passenger window and says, “In.”

Nasty Ass looks around nervously and then gets in. He’s a little surprised, because normally Malone don’t let him in his car because he says he stinks, although Nasty don’t smell it.

He’s jonesing hard.

Nose running, hands trembling as he hugs himself and rocks back and forth. And Nasty tells him, “I’m hurtin’. Can’t find no one. You gotta help me, man.”

His thin face is drawn, his brown skin sallow. His two upper front teeth stick out like a squirrel’s in a bad cartoon, and if it weren’t for his smell, he’d be called Nasty Mouth.

Now the man is sick. “Please, Malone.”

Malone reaches under the dash to a metal box attached with a magnet. He opens the box and hands Nasty an envelope, enough to fix and get well.

Nasty opens the door.

"No, stay in the car," Malone says.

"I can fix in here?"

"Yeah, what the fuck. It's Christmas."

Malone takes a left and then heads south down Broadway as Nasty Ass shakes the heroin into a spoon, uses a lighter to cook it, then draws it into a syringe.

"That thing clean?" Malone asks.

"As a newborn baby."

Nasty Ass sticks the needle in his vein and pushes the plunger. His head snaps back and then he sighs.

He's well again. "Where we goin'?"

"Port Authority," Malone says. "You're getting out of town for a while."

Nasty's scared. Alarmed. "Why?!"

"It's for your own good." Just in case Fat Teddy is pissed enough to track him down and do him.

"I can't leave town," Nasty Ass says. "I got no hookups out of town."

"Well, you're going."

"Please don't make me," Nasty Ass says. He actually starts crying. "I can't jones out of town. I'll die out there."

"You want to jones at Rikers?" Malone asks. "Because that's your other choice."

"Why are you being a dick, Malone?"

"It's my nature."

"Never used to was," Nasty Ass says.

"Yeah, well, this ain't the used to was."

"Where should I go?"

"I don't know. Philly. Baltimore."

"I got a cousin in Baltimore."

"Go there, then," Malone says. He peels out five hundred-dollar bills and hands them to Nasty Ass. "Do not spend all of this on junk. Get the fuck out of New York and stay there awhile."

"How long I gotta stay?" He looks desperate, really scared. Malone doubts that Nasty Ass has ever been to the East Side, never mind out of town.

"Call me in a week or so and I'll let you know," Malone says. He pulls up in front of Port Authority and lets Nasty out. "I see you in New York, I *am* going to be mad, Nasty Ass."

"Thought we was friends, Malone."

"No, we're not friends," Malone says. "We're not going to be friends. You're my informer. A snitch. That's all."

Driving back uptown, Malone leaves the windows open.

Claudette opens the door.

"Merry Christmas, baby," she says.

Malone loves her voice.

It was her voice, low and soft, even more than her looks, that first drew him to her.

A voice full of promises and reassurance.

You'll find comfort here.

And pleasure.

In my arms, in my mouth, in my pussy.

He walks in and sits down on her little couch—she has a different word for it he can never remember—and says, "Sorry I'm so late."

"I just got home myself," she says.

Even though she's wearing a white kimono and her perfume smells like heaven, Malone thinks. She just got home and she got herself ready for me.

Claudette sits on the couch beside him, opens a carved wooden box on the coffee table and takes out a thin joint. She lights it, takes a hit and hands it to him.

Malone sucks down a hit and says, "I thought you were four to twelve."

"I thought I was, too."

"Tough shift?" he asks.

"Fights, suicide attempts, ODs," Claudette says, taking the joint back from him. "Man came in barefoot with a broken wrist, said he knows you."

An E-room nurse usually on the night or the graveyard shift, so she's seen it all. She and Malone met when he drove a junkie CI who had accidentally shot half his foot off straight to the hospital.

"Why didn't you call an ambulance?" she'd asked him.

"In Harlem?" Malone asked. "He'd have bled out while the EMTs were at Starbucks. Instead he bled all over my interior. I just got the thing detailed, too."

"You're a cop."

"Guilty."

Now she leans back and stretches her legs across his. The kimono slides up to reveal her thighs. There's a spot just below her pussy that Malone thinks is the softest place on earth.

"Tonight," she says, "we had an abandoned crack baby. Left right on the front steps."

"Wrapped in swaddling clothes?"

"I get the irony, Malone," she says. "How was your day?"

"Yeah, good."

Malone likes that she doesn't press him, that she's satisfied with what he tells her. A lot of women aren't, they want him to "share," they want details he'd rather forget than recount. Claudette gets it—she has her own horrors.

He strokes that soft spot. "You're tired. You probably want to sleep."

"No, baby, I want to fuck."

They finish their drinks and go into her bedroom.

Claudette undresses him, kissing skin as she bares it. She goes to her knees and takes him into her mouth and even in the dark bedroom, with light coming in only from the street, he loves the look of her full red lips on his cock.

She's not high tonight, it's just the weed, although it's very good weed, and he loves that, too. He reaches down and feels her hair, then slides his hand down into the kimono and feels her breast, teases it and feels her moan.

Malone puts his hands on her shoulders to stop her. "I want to be in you."

She gets up, goes to the bed and lies down. Draws her knees up like an invitation and then issues one. "Come here, then, baby."

She's wet and warm.

He slides back and forth across her body, across the full breasts and the dark brown skin and reaches down with a finger to feel that soft spot as outside sirens blare and people shout and he doesn't care, doesn't have to care right now, only has to slide in and out of her and hear her say, "I love that, baby, I *love* that."

When he feels himself about to come, he grabs her ass—Claudette says she has no ass for a black girl—but he grabs her small tight ass and pulls her close and pushes himself as deep in her as he can go until he feels that little pocket in her and she grabs his shoulder and she bucks up and comes just before he does.

He comes like he always does with her, from the tips of his toes through the top of his head, and maybe that's the dope but he thinks it's her, with that low soft voice and warm brown skin, slick

and sweaty now, mixing with his, and maybe it's a minute or maybe it's an hour when he hears her say, "Oh, baby, I'm tired."

"Yeah, me too."

He rolls off her.

She sleepily squeezes his hand and then she's out.

He lies on his back. Across the street the liquor store owner must have forgotten to turn off his lights, and their reflection blinks red on Claudette's ceiling.

It's Christmas in the jungle and for this short time, at least, Malone is at peace.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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