The Righteous Men

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1

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CHAPTER ONE

Friday, 9.10pm, Manhattan

The night of the first killing was filled with song. St Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan trembled to the sound of Handel's Messiah, the grand choral masterpiece that never failed to rouse even the most slumbering audience. Its swell of voices surged at the roof of the cathedral. It was as if they wanted to break out, to reach the very heavens.

Inside, close to the front, sat a father and son, the older man's eyes closed, moved as always by this, his favourite piece of music. The son's gaze alternated between the performers – the singers dressed in black, the conductor wildly waving his shock of greying hair – and the man at his side. He liked looking at him, gauging his reactions; he liked being this close.

Tonight was a celebration. A month earlier Will Monroe Jr had landed the job he had dreamed of ever since he had come to America. Still only in his late twenties, he was now a reporter, on the fast track at *The New York Times*. Monroe Sr inhabited a different realm. He was a lawyer, one of the most accomplished of his generation, now serving as a federal judge on the second circuit of the US Court of Appeals. He liked to acknowledge achievement when he saw it and this

young man at his side, whose boyhood he had all but missed, had reached a milestone. He found his son's hand and gave it a squeeze.

It was at that moment, no more than a forty-minute subway ride across town but a world away, that Howard Macrae heard the first steps behind him. He was not scared. Outsiders may have steered clear of this Brooklyn neighbourhood of Brownsville, notorious for its drug-riddled deprivation, but Macrae knew every street and alley.

He was part of the landscape. A pimp of some two decades' standing, he was wired into Brownsville. He had been a smart operator, too, ensuring that in the gang warfare that scarred the area, he always remained a neutral. Factions would clash and shift, but Howard stayed put, constant. No one had challenged the patch where his whores plied their trade for years.

So he was not too worried by the sound behind him. Still, he found it odd that the footsteps did not stop. He could tell they were close. Why would anybody be tailing him? He turned his head to peer over his left shoulder and gasped, immediately tripping over his feet. It was a gun unlike any he had ever seen – and it was aimed at him.

Inside the cathedral, the chorus were now one being, their lungs opening and closing like the bellows of a single, mighty organ. The music was insistent:

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

Howard Macrae was now facing forward, attempting to break into an instinctive run. But he could feel a strange, piercing sensation in his right thigh. His leg seemed to be giving way, collapsing under his weight, refusing to obey his orders. I have to run! Yet his body would not respond. He seemed to be moving in slow motion, as if wading through water.

Now the mutiny had spread to his arms, which were first lethargic, then floppy. His brain raced with the urgency of the situation, but it too now seemed overwhelmed, as if submerged under a sudden burst of floodwater. He felt so tired.

He found himself lying on the ground clasping his right leg, aware that it and the rest of his limbs were surrendering to numbness. He looked up. He could see nothing but the steel glint of a blade.

In the cathedral, Will felt his pulse quicken. *The Messiah* was reaching its climax, the whole audience could sense it. A soprano voice hovered above them:

If God be for us, who can be against us?
Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?
It is God that justifieth, who is he that condemneth?

Macrae could only watch as the knife hovered over his chest. He tried to see who was behind it, to make out a

face, but he could not. The gleam of metal dazzled him; it seemed to have caught all the night's moonlight on its hard, polished surface. He knew he ought to be terrified: the voice inside his head told him he was. But it sounded oddly removed, like a commentator describing a faraway football game. Howard could see the knife coming closer towards him, but still it seemed to be happening to someone else.

Now the orchestra was in full force, Handel's music coursing through the church with enough force to waken the gods. The alto and tenor were as one, demanding to know: *O Death, where is thy sting?*

Will was not a classical buff like his father, but the majesty and power of the music was making the hairs on the back of his neck stand to attention. Still staring straight ahead, he tried to imagine the expression his father would be wearing: he pictured him, rapt, and hoped that underneath that blissful exterior there might also lurk some pleasure at sharing this moment with his only son.

The blade descended, first across the chest. Macrae saw the red line it scored, as if the knife were little more than a scarlet marker pen. The skin seemed to bubble and blister: he did not understand why he felt no pain. Now the knife was moving down, slicing his stomach open like a bag of grain. The contents spilled out, a warm soft bulge of viscous innards. Howard was watching it all, until the moment the dagger was finally held aloft.

Only then could he see the face of his murderer. His larynx managed to squeeze out a gasp of shock – and recognition. The blade found his heart and all was dark. The mission had begun.