

And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them.

And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst,

They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.

Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?

This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not.

So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.

And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground.

And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.

When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?

She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.



Sunday

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life,' said Brother Isaiah on TV to his dead body lying on the bed below. The men leaning over his corpse didn't hear, and if they had they would have regarded the words as prophecy, not irony. I kept my distance and let them squint.

'It looks like strangulation,' one of the men said, pointing to the faded purple bruising that ringed Isaiah's neck. He picked up Isaiah's hands for a closer look. 'No sign of defensive wounds. Nothing visible under the fingernails but we won't know for sure until forensics gets here.' The man – who was older and must have been their lieutenant – sounded like he'd actually done real police work before he took up his new career regulating women's hemlines. The younger officers clustered around him fingered their hats and listened with the respectful attention of students on a field trip.

The TV Isaiah was everything you expected from a man of God. His strong, square jaw was set against the fallen world, and his eyes managed to be both piercing and compassionate at the same time. His full, bone-white hair made him look like an Old Testament prophet after a visit to the barber. The Brother Isaiah on the bed was just a wrinkled old man in boxer shorts and long black socks who'd died in a room that was not his own.

‘As you can see,’ the lieutenant continued, ‘there are no signs of a struggle, here or in any of the other rooms.’ The room was as plush as you’d expect the executive suite at the Bingham Grand to be. TV Isaiah looked down on his own corpse from the screen that took up most of one wall, his voice manifested through surround-sound speakers. The four-poster bed his body lay on was something heavy and eighteenth-century, its twisted sheets the only sign of disorder in the room. The walls and fixtures were dark-stained oak and polished brass, so every young executive vice-president who stayed here could fancy himself one of the robber barons of old.

Not all the lieutenant’s charges were behaving themselves. A few had broken away from the group and were molesting the room. They rifled drawers and picked up objects with their bare hands, smearing their fingerprints everywhere. One examined Isaiah’s suits hanging in the closet, brushing away possible hair and fibres as if he were the old man’s valet. Another poked around in the night table, flipping through the Gideon Bible before putting objects back in whatever place he found convenient.

A flushing sound came from another room. One of the Daveys had used the toilet of a crime scene.

‘Jesus Christ,’ escaped my lips.

Their heads snapped in my direction. ‘Lieutenant,’ said one of the officers, ‘what’s he doing here?’

The circle of faces turned in my direction. I smiled back at them, and kept holding up the wall with my shoulder.

‘Somebody turn that TV off,’ White said as he entered the bedroom. ‘Everybody but Strange, get out.’

The lieutenant herded his charges out of the room. They were reluctant to leave such a famous corpse, and blamed me with their eyes.

It was the first time I'd seen Ezekiel White up close. His grey off-the-rack suit advertised his commitment to Protestant modesty. His dyed, thinning hair and generous pot belly did not. He had thin, humourless lips and a nose that flared wide and flat like a hammerhead shark. It was a mystery to me how he'd ever got on television, even in the more physically forgiving arena of twenty-four-hour news.

'You're better dressed than I expected,' he said.

I assumed he meant the fedora in my hand. 'I like to confound expectations, Mr White.'

'That's Dr White.' A doctor of theology, not medicine, given by an institution of questionable academic but unimpeachable political integrity.

'It's good to see you've got some people with experience,' I said, 'now that you're supposed to be actual police.'

The Elders had some old ideas about how the citizens of this country should live, and they weren't inclined to rely on the honour system to make sure people followed them. They didn't trust law enforcement, so the Elders created an entirely new parallel organization responsible for the nation's moral hygiene. White got the top job as a reward for a lifetime of boot-licking on national television. I'd heard he had a nose for dirt better than any hack's and a love of blackmail that was almost sexual. He sounded more than qualified.

'All of my officers are good men,' White said. What he meant was that they were loyal to him and didn't sleep in on Sundays. The mid-level officers like the lieutenant were cops

enticed away from secular forces by the promise of advancement. They had been promoted beyond their abilities, but at least their time on the job had left a residue of professionalism and common sense.

The rank and file had been filled by a type of clean-cut kid we called Daveys. They were the Elders' foot soldiers: home-schooled, God-fearing kids who haunted the corridors of power with recommendations from their pastors and a willingness to do anything for the cause. Their ignorance of the secular world was considered an asset, not a liability. Hacks who'd barely learned to shave now had the power of arrest.

'Did you take a look at the body?' White asked.

'From a distance.'

'What do you think?'

'I think one of your boys had a very good question: Why did you drag me away from a perfectly good sandwich?'

An hour ago, two of White's goons had appeared in the reflection of the Starlight's chrome counter. The badges they flashed – an eagle surmounted on a golden cross – looked like they had been won at Coney Island, but the diner went silent anyway. The name on the badge said 'Committee for Child Protection'. Everyone called them the Holy Rollers, just not to their faces.

Before I could explain the allure of the famous Starlight beef brisket on rye they had each taken an arm and dragged me away. I had decided to go along peacefully; I was curious, and the Starlight didn't deliver to Rikers Island.

White gave me a sour look. 'Do you know who this man was?'

Brother Isaiah's radio programme, *Hour of Deliverance*, was syndicated in thirty-two states. The majority of his listeners were

still in the South, but fear and official patronage had pushed his message steadily north of the Mason-Dixon Line. His organization, the Crusade of Love, had been dedicated to missionary work in Africa. After what happened in Houston, he'd been offered a seat on the council of Elders and asked to bring the Crusade home. Brother Isaiah had agreed, on the condition that his organization retained complete autonomy. The Elders needed his enormous popularity and moral authority to cement their rule, so they were in no position to refuse. Somewhere over the Atlantic the Crusade went from building wells and saving souls to being shock troops for Old Testament morality.

'I never caught Brother Isaiah's radio show,' I said. 'I didn't think he appeared on television.'

'He thought all televangelists were charlatans,' White said. 'That footage is from the last Day of Remembrance, re-broadcast in honour of his arrival in New York.' White's thick, unfashionable black glasses enlarged his eyes, giving an impression of increased watchfulness that didn't include heightened understanding.

'I've had a look at your file, Mr Strange. I'm one of the few people who can read it unabridged. Your service to our country in the Great Patriotic Crusade against Iran is truly remarkable, especially during the siege of the Khomeini Mosque.'

There were a lot of different names for our war with Iran. 'Great Patriotic Crusade' was a wolf-whistle between the Elders' true believers. The rest of the world used the term 'Greater Middle-Eastern War', as it was the easiest way to include all the insurrections, guerrilla wars and suicide attacks that happened in the region during the conflict. I just called it the worst three years of my life.

‘You’ve served America before, and she needs your help again,’ White continued. ‘I want you to solve this murder.’

If he had seen something in my file that suggested appealing to my patriotism, then White must have been reading it upside down.

‘Last time I checked you had an entire agency for that sort of thing,’ I said. ‘This is FBI territory, if not the secret service’s.’ I wasn’t clear whether the secret service now guarded the real rulers of the country, or just the figurehead in the White House. ‘Besides,’ I said, ‘I don’t work murders.’

Murder’s exalted status as the worst among crimes meant that they were worked by the best police, those who had proven themselves through years of putting down cases. I investigated the same things every other private eye did: infidelity, fraud, the occasional extortion or missing person to keep me awake in the afternoons. A body of this importance called for the Chief of Detectives and half the FBI. Right now I would have settled for any kind of cop, because there wasn’t a single man with a real badge in the whole building.

‘Look around you.’

On the night table was a framed, autographed flyer from the late President Adamson’s first campaign. He was the hero of the Revivalist movement and a founder of the Council of Elders, the secret rulers of the new America. They were the ones responsible for turning Congress into the most prestigious puppet theatre in the world. The handwriting on the flyer was illegible, but it might as well have read: ‘Après moi le fucking deluge’.

The rest of the table was loaded with smut. Glossies devoted to every possible kink and perversion were fanned out like

coffee-table books. In the nightstand's open drawer I saw a dime bag of weed and another of what looked like cocaine, though it could just as easily have been MDMA or PCP. On the floor was a black plastic leash, white rope and two pairs of handcuffs.

'How many people do you think we want to see this?' White said.

'Somewhere south of one.'

'The Elders have told me to handle this matter. They don't trust the secular authorities.'

'And you in turn don't trust your own men.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' he said, not as offended as I'd expected him to be. 'I know the heart of every man who works for me. However, it has recently come to my attention that my agents are being shadowed.'

I let my scepticism show.

'I believe unreconstructed elements of the secular authorities, probably atheists and materialists, are trying to undermine our work. I can't risk them finding out about Brother Isaiah's death.'

'He was the spiritual counsellor for millions of people,' I said. 'You may have gelded the domestic press, but the foreign news outlets are going to start asking questions as soon as he misses a broadcast.'

'I'd throw every foreign correspondent out of the country if I could,' White said. They weren't as susceptible to his usual method of media control: promise an exclusive as compensation for killing the story (carrot) and threaten to cut the entire network's access if they didn't keep their mouths shut (stick). 'They're objectively pro-terrorist and anti-family, to a man.'

However, the Elders believe that would be unwise in the long term, so my hands are tied. Brother Isaiah had intended to go upstate tonight. He often retreated to fast and pray, so no one will expect him to appear until his next broadcast.'

'When's that?'

'Next Sunday, seven o'clock,' White said. 'I'll give you five thousand dollars as an advance, then twenty more when we have a conviction. I know you need the money.'

'I need the trouble less. I'll pass,' I said, and started for the door.

'Mr Strange, don't insult both our intelligences by pretending that you have a choice.'

I paused at the bedroom threshold and considered my future. They'd probably start with a complete audit of all my tax returns for the last ten years. Then they'd scrutinize every case I'd ever worked, to get at my licence. After that it would be my friends, especially anyone who might lend me money. They wouldn't hurt me; poverty would do that for them. I could try to fight them, but I'd lose, and my damn curiosity had already gotten the better of me anyway.

'I assume this room is his,' White nodded. 'Not bad for a holy man.'

'The Crusade paid for everything.'

'I'm sure it did. Is that the murder weapon?' I said, pointing to the leash.

'We don't know yet.'

'Who found him?'

'A maid. We're holding her as a material witness.'

I did another circuit of the room. Manhattan glowed through the sliding doors that led out to the balcony. A blimp hovered

in the distance, one of five the NYPD had watching the city at all times. A ten-storey cross glowed from its home on top of the Empire State Building. It had been built a few years ago purely with donations, old ladies sending dollars they could not spare so all of Manhattan would fall under its neon shadow.

Whoever rented the suite could admire the city's tallest peaks from his bed, imagining himself master of all he surveyed. Brother Isaiah would have seen it differently. His eyes had been attuned to the spectrum of sin, silhouettes of lust and temptation visible through the high-rise walls.

'Tell me what you see,' White said.

'The conclusion we're supposed to draw from this scene is that Brother Isaiah died in the company of a fallen woman, during or after sex, in some kind of auto-erotic asphyxiation.'

'That is a disgusting and ridiculous accusation,' White said. His eyes widened and he showed some of his bottom teeth, the beginning of the righteous indignation that had made him so popular on Sunday panel shows.

'Of course it's ridiculous. Do you know anyone who arranges their pornography this tastefully?'

White declined to answer.

The drugs were still wrapped up. There were no clothes strewn about the place or any evidence of a woman except some make-up smears on the sheets. The bedroom looked like a twelve-year-old's idea of a den of sin. 'If I hadn't seen the crime scene myself I might have been inclined to believe it. People that interested in the intimate lives of others usually have peculiar habits of their own.' I gave the room another once-over to be sure. 'This whole room is a poison pill ready to dissolve as soon as the murder becomes public; someone has

constructed it to give you the finger.’ I could see White didn’t like my reasoning, but he couldn’t argue with it. ‘Do you have any suspects?’

White pulled a stack of files from his briefcase. ‘These are a sample of the threats received by Brother Isaiah in the last year. The Crusade’s work produces some discontent.’

‘That’s a surprise.’ Sending in undercover agents to find unlicensed dancing, under-age drinking and anti-faith discrimination – which meant whatever they said it did – produced a lot of things. Discontent was one of them. Fear, in much greater quantities, was another.

‘The Crusade arrives somewhere, makes a lot of headline-grabbing accusations, and then leaves others to clean up the mess,’ White said. ‘Our work – which actually drains the swamp of sin – never gets the recognition it deserves.’

It was no secret that the Crusade and the Committee for Child Protection didn’t get along. The Committee was the Elders’ official attack dog, with full law enforcement powers. The Crusade was really nothing more than a citizens’ group, albeit a very organized and powerful one. They couldn’t arrest anyone that they accused of impropriety; that was the Rollers’ job. The publicity the Crusade generated meant he had to investigate their accusations. (That was what angered White so much.) His officers may have been the ones who put on the cuffs, but it was the Crusade that got all the credit.

‘I’ll need to look at some of those accusations. I expect the Crusade will put up a fight,’ I said.

‘They’ll be happy to turn over something to me, but I doubt you’ll find anything,’ White said. He sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at the corpse. ‘I’d be surprised if half a

dozen people actually know why the Crusade is here. Brother Isaiah kept all the big fish to himself?

A Crusade Mission was half old-time revival, half inquisition. The organization wasn't on an organized tour of the country; it just arrived where it knew it could cause trouble. The festivities usually began with hundreds of young women taking a purity oath – a pledge to stay unspoiled for their future husbands. There were often mass baptisms or conversions that served as a warm-up act for the main event: an address by Brother Isaiah. Every network in the country would cover it, because they knew it was during his sermon that Brother Isaiah named names.

In Cleveland, he'd destroyed the careers of six Councilmen by accusing them of atheist sympathies. He'd also dragged more than fifty people out of the closet over concern for their spiritual welfare. Those ruined lives were just the appetizer. Isaiah's centrepiece was images of the mayor with a woman much younger than his wife. The networks made sure the photos went out nationally.

'For all we know, the real cases may have died with him,' I said. Someone might be resting easier tonight, knowing that the elegant machine that had once held their secrets was now just another lump of meat.

'You should look at the threats first,' White said. 'I'm convinced that the only ones with both the lack of conscience and contempt for God to commit this outrage are secular nihilists.'

The murder of one of the most powerful Christian leaders in the country would of course be blamed on an unhinged atheist. The wheels of martyrdom were already spinning.

‘And if he isn’t an atheist?’

‘Then we’ll put the jihadi where he can never hurt anyone again,’ White said, pointing down. He didn’t have a chin so much as a piece of gristle that wobbled when he became emphatic. ‘It’s where he’s going anyway. We’ll just be giving him a six-foot head start.’ He expected laughter but I’m not that polite.

‘I’m sure you realize the gravity of the situation,’ White said, but I could feel him warming up for a lecture anyway. ‘We are besieged by enemies foreign and domestic. Islamofascists attack our heroes in the Holy Land. Atheists and their liberal tools damage the foundations of our society with terrorist-coddling and sexual licence. We must find the murderer. If we don’t, when the American people hear of this atrocity, they may lose the will to fight . . .’ He trailed off, as he always did during these diatribes, to let his audience imagine whichever outcome they found most terrifying. ‘A full confession, especially about the staging, would be preferable.’

‘I’ll see what I can do.’

‘There’s one more thing,’ White said. ‘We found this near the body.’ He showed me a type of digital Dictaphone that hadn’t been made in at least fifteen years.

‘Is there anything on it?’

‘Brother Isaiah’s last sermon. The date on the file is three days ago.’

So there was no hope of hearing the killer’s voice in the background then. ‘Is there anything special in the sermon, anything out of the ordinary?’ I asked. ‘Does he mention anyone by name?’

‘The themes are fairly typical for one of Brother Isaiah’s sermons,’ White said. ‘It won’t have anything to do with his

death, but take a copy anyway; it might do a heathen like you some good.'

I did as I was told and copied the file to my phone.

White put an envelope of reassuring thickness in my breast pocket. 'You don't work for me. You've never met me. If I find out you've said otherwise, or you've told anyone about Brother Isaiah, I'll make you disappear.' He said the last part matter-of-factly, because that was how it was done. They probably had a standard form, just to track the expenses.

'I may not get very far without some kind of official sanction.'

Most of the other investigators I knew had been cops. They still looked like police, no matter what their tax returns said. Their walk had been refined over years of patrol, their eyes numbed to the unpleasant side of humanity. They were used to walking into a room with the full authority of the state behind them, and nobody had told their body they no longer carried a badge. That demeanour had its advantages: since they talked and walked like cops, people tended to treat them like cops, which gave them a lot more gravitas than the average private dick.

I didn't have the look of authority to rely on, but that wasn't always a disadvantage. People smelled the cop on you whether you wanted them to or not. It was easier for me to become an electrician, courier, or some other working stiff people weren't inclined to take notice of. People might see the military in me if they looked hard enough, but that didn't mean much. The country was full of veterans doing everything under the sun to get by.

'You're here because I've heard that you're a very resourceful

man,' White said. 'I'm sure you'll manage, and I don't want to know how.' He handed me a phone. 'You'll find a number in its memory that you can reach me on. Use that phone, and nothing else; it's encrypted. Even with these precautions, I never want to hear you say his name again.' White looked at the corpse and lapsed into silence. 'I'll expect regular updates.'

'Then you'll hear from me soon,' I said.

'Aren't you going to take the files?'

'Send them along with the others. You know where I live.'

The suite's living room was as plush as the bedroom. There was a large table for holding conferences and a crushed-velvet sofa with matching Queen Anne chairs. The Rollers loitered in a semicircle in front of the door and pretended that they hadn't been eavesdropping.

'You think we don't know what we're doing,' the lieutenant said. He was a well-built man whose greying brush cut gave him an inch on me. He would be on the Committee for Child Protection boxing team, if such a thing existed.

'If you knew what you were doing, I wouldn't be here,' I said. 'Now do you mind?'

'I heard you learned a new dance over in the Big Sandbox,' the lieutenant said. 'Why don't you show it to us? I want to see this famous "Tehran Twitch"?' He mimed a series of spastic jerks.

The other officers laughed on cue.

'Are you going to get out of my way?'

'Not unless you've got the stones to try and make me,' said the lieutenant, leaning in. There's a fundamental flaw in the thinking of most people who fight for sport. They assume that both people have to put their hands up before anything can

happen. That's why he didn't see the fingers of my left hand go from my waist into the side of his neck.

The lieutenant coughed and tried to suck in air as he fell down. The others didn't do much but stare.

'What is going on in here?' White yelled.

I let him take in the sight of me standing over one of his underlings before I started for the door.

'Tell your Daveys to stay out of my way,' I said. 'Amateur night is over.'

I worked out of my home or lived in my office, depending on how you looked at it. The ink-stained pine desk from which I did all my business was big enough to make me look significant. The two chairs that stood in front of it were uncomfortable enough to encourage clients to get to the point. The venetian blinds behind my desk had been purchased to slant the sunlight in forbidding ways. My office was what a private investigator's was supposed to look like, down to the block lettering on the frosted glass front door. Clients found that reassuring.

The files White had sent over covered every available surface. I'd started three hours ago on the Crusade's cases in New York; my takeout hadn't gone down well, and I wasn't ready to face the delusion and mania that made up any organization's crazy file. The Crusade had officially been in New York for less than two days, but the surveillance reports indicated that agents – their names redacted – had been laying the groundwork for months. The Crusade had put eyes and ears in every neighbourhood of every borough. The logistics required to run that many undercover operatives must have

been enormous, but it was how they could arrive in a city and make a flurry of high-profile accusations immediately, a blitzkrieg in the war for souls.

The MO that emerged from the case files matched what I'd heard. Half of the operations were straight surveillance, the rest provocations. 'Cured' gay men who looked young enough to be seventeen were sent into known homosexual establishments. If anyone inside was stupid enough to make a pass, they'd say the place was aiding and abetting sexual abuse. Obnoxious people wearing prominent gold crosses were sent into restaurants and businesses to see if their behaviour elicited any comments that could be construed as insulting to their faith. Armies of good-looking youths haunted bars and nightclubs, trying to convince others to buy their oregano and baking soda. Anyone who let anyone else have too much fun would be referred to the authorities.

In practice most people ended up with nothing worse than fines and threats. Being able to go on national television and say they'd found the sinners was what was important. A few were sent away, and some even deserved it. There was nothing in the files big enough to open a press conference, certainly nothing worth assassinating an Elder over.

I streamed Brother Isaiah's last sermon from my phone to the stereo. 'Brothers and sisters, in the last few years I have travelled all over this great country spreading the news of our Lord's love and forgiveness. I have been fortunate to meet and pray with many of you; your faith is a source of great comfort and strength to me. There is a question I know many of you would like answered, because it is the one I hear most often. It is a question that the disciples asked of Jesus Himself:

“What shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the end of the world?”

Whatever I thought of his beliefs, Brother Isaiah had possessed a magnificent voice. It had both gravity and warmth, the voice of an old friend telling you important news. The rest of the sermon focused on how God’s plan for his children was too sublime for any human being to understand, and saying you did was the height of pride. It sounded like the usual exhortation to shut up and do as you’re told, but I’d never been to Sunday school. I stopped the voice of God, and turned on the television.

‘A homicide bomber attacked a coalition checkpoint west of Hebron this morning,’ the TV said. They used to tell you who the bombers were, before mothers of four and grandfathers began strapping on C-4. A car burned near a line of barbed wire. The soldiers forming a cordon around the scene were watched over by a line of tanks, their turrets pointed into the desert. ‘None of our heroes was hurt in the explosion, thank Jesus,’ the peroxide reporter said. ‘They truly are watched over by a higher power.’ The camera lingered over one private’s stricken face, staring at the charred body parts kept out of shot. He hadn’t been in the Holy Land long enough to grow the grim mask the other men in his unit wore. That shot would probably get someone fired.

I left the TV on in case it said something useful, and opened the crazy file. It wasn’t what I expected. In between the crayon rants about the second coming were pleas, of innocence and for forgiveness. Every single one of them was addressed to Brother Isaiah directly.

‘Dear Brother, forgive my sin, I was trapped in a loveless marriage . . .’

‘We know our son made a mistake, but he has repented and come back to Jesus. With the drug possession on his record, my son will never be able to go to college. If you could find it in your heart . . . ?’

‘Brother Isaiah, I have struggled with this terrible sickness for my whole life. I have finally received the counselling and prayer I so desperately needed. I have attached a letter from the pastor of the Colorado New Life Rehabilitation Center, pronouncing me cured. If you were to tell the proper authorities that I am now a fully recovering homosexual, I may be reinstated in my teaching job . . . ?’

A news segment on the Middle East always ended with a reminder of why we fight. Children played in the dust of the new settlements, obliging the camera with smiles and laughter. In the background I could see American soldiers manning the guard towers of the security wall. Orthodox Jews prayed at the Wailing Wall, tears of devotion mixing with the sweat that escaped their yarmulkes. Jesus still hung over the altar of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. His patiently bloody face presided over the Delta soldiers who lined the church’s walls. They cradled their rifles and watched everything through wraparound sunglasses, the red cross on their shoulders marking them not as healers, but guardians of that sacred place.

The Crusade had separated letters that made explicit threats into a smaller pile. The files included dossiers on every single writer and information on their families if the case officer thought it relevant. Most were easy to reject out of hand as empty threats made by angry and fearful men. Only one had the dangerous combination of rage and lucidity:

‘Dear Brother Isaiah: With the support of people like you, the government sent me out into the desert to die.’ I checked the handwriting to make sure it wasn’t mine. ‘I spent three years at the Arkangel settlement. The tour was only supposed to last a year. Most of the time we traded rifle fire with children. One morning—’ Someone had redacted the rest of that sentence, and the whole of the next two pages. ‘I can’t sleep. I see that morning whenever I close my eyes. You’ve turned my own mother against me. She’s your biggest fan, never misses a broadcast. When I left for the Holy Land she was so proud that I was fulfilling God’s will. I tried to tell her what it was like, what I did, but she won’t listen. She just tells me to pray. I learned how to kill people because of you. I like doing it with a 30.06 rifle from far away. If you and that travelling freak show ever come to New York, I’ll show you just how good a student I am.’

The author’s name was Jack Small, an honourably discharged ex-marine. His tour in Israel had earned him a purple heart, a commendation, and a case of post-traumatic stress disorder. There were clues about the incident Jack had referred to, but it must have been bad to earn two pages of black. It could be ordinary bureaucratic ass-covering, or the Crusade was trying to hide something. I’d have to pay them a visit tomorrow and find out.

The news ended with nothing said about Brother Isaiah. The next programme was a panel shout-fest. The topic was whether America should aid Israel in building the third temple. By aid they meant do it for them, as the Israelis didn’t seem to be enthusiastic about the idea. The first step would be destroying the Dome of the Rock, and God knows what kind of new hell that would unleash. I’d seen footage of Israeli demonstrations

against our presence and our plans, on foreign new channels that weren't banned as much as officially unavailable in this country. That didn't stop half the population from rigging up pirate satellite dishes, camouflaging them like the secret antennae the East Germans had set up to hear rock music on Radio Free Europe. It was worth the risk of heavy fines to get away from inane programmes like this one, and the French stations sometimes showed tits.

The panellists were stacked three to one, maybe reflecting the proportion of congregations still uneasy with the idea. I wondered how long they'd tolerate this debate, at least in the open. I turned off the TV and picked up my cell phone.

'Felix,' Benny said. 'What can I do for you?'

'Did you get those Knicks tickets?' I said, which was our code for asking if it was safe to talk.

'No one's around,' Benny said. We counted silently to three, and then activated encryption for the phone line.

'Why don't we use encryption all the time?' Benny said.

'Using encryption that doesn't have a back door for law enforcement is illegal, remember?'

'Not if you are law enforcement,' he said, which wouldn't do much good for me if we were caught. 'Now tell me what you want.'

'Can you meet me tomorrow?'

'You need a secure line to ask me on a date?'

'Go fuck yourself, this is important. Yes or no?'

'No. I gotta go up to Albany tomorrow and meet with some Holy Roller shitbirds. How about lunch the day after?'

'I'll see you at the Starlight.'

'What a fucking surprise,' Benny said, and hung up.

The fat envelope lay on my desk, a few hundred-dollar bills poking out. Under normal circumstances, someone like Ezekiel White would never give five thousand dollars to an independent like me. If he wanted to go outside his own organization, there were several large firms discreet enough even for his paranoid mind.

White and his people were part of a diverse group of zealots, charlatans, fantasists and thugs collectively known as the Revivalist movement. The single name made cursing them more efficient. The Revivalists had been the foot soldiers for Adamson's presidential campaign. They stuffed envelopes, knocked on doors, and maybe knocked a few other things if the stories of polling place intimidation were believed. The Elders had inherited the movement, and used it with even fewer scruples than the late President. Besides my few encounters with the Holy Rollers, I hadn't had much contact with the rest of the movement.

That went double for the Crusade of Love. I had never knowingly been within a hundred yards of its operatives or officials. We'd been swimming in the same cesspools (if these files were any indication). They might have picked up my name there. I certainly hadn't done anything lately to merit this kind of assignment, and I wasn't important enough to be made an example of. The Crusade was completely independent and never let the Elders forget it. As much its members hated White, I couldn't imagine them asking an unbeliever to investigate the murder of their household God. It wouldn't be worth it just to spite a rival in the same racket.

That left the Elders themselves. Those twenty-four men hid in plain sight, issuing orders to the President and Congress

from Cabinet posts, churches and broadcast centres. Every single one was a pastor, priest, minister, or self-declared man of God. They were the only people who could give White marching orders, but I doubted that they even knew my name. I would have thought that the Elders would take the murder of one of their own more seriously, but I must be wrong. White was still in charge.

Thinking any more about it right now was pointless. All I really had was speculation, and that still wasn't admissible in a court of law. I'd just have to figure out what the angles were before I became expendable.

My watch beeped. I locked the files and the money in the safe behind my desk and went into the bathroom. There were three prescription bottles in my medicine cabinet, all from different pharmacies known to bend the rules. I shook the meagre contents of each one, let the pills fall over one another in the harsh fluorescent light.

The blue pills were called Delectra, officially prescribed to ease the nausea of Aids sufferers and those undergoing chemotherapy. The green meanies were called Evalacet, an arthritis medication I took in very small doses to treat muscle and joint pain. Those two I was supposed to take every twelve hours. I was almost out of Delectra. If I didn't get any more in the next twenty-four hours, breakfast on Tuesday would be a challenge.

The last bottle of pills I took once a day. They were red and had no brand name, their uses so specialized they didn't merit a soft-focus marketing campaign. The proper name had about sixteen letters, a third of which were 'x's. The drug had originally been developed to treat severe epilepsy and had been

tested off-label on Parkinson's. They were what really kept the syndrome in check, and allowed me to function as a semi-normal human being.

I was uninsurable due to a pre-existing condition that no medical body would admit existed. Sometimes I convinced a sympathetic doctor to write me a prescription for one of the symptoms; otherwise I'd have to scare up a forged scrip. Either way I still paid for all the medication myself, out of pockets that were already empty. The five thousand White had given me was promised to someone else. Having a week to solve this case was bad enough, but I was going to be out of red pills a few days before that. The bonus White had offered was the only way to get them. I'd have to come up with results fast.

At least I finally had a real case. I spent most of my days exposing the petty deception that was the bread and butter of any private eye: insurance frauds and cheating husbands, with no more than a few grand or custody of some brat hanging in the balance. I'd wanted a big case, and you couldn't get bigger than the Isaiah murder. There were about a hundred different ways it could go sideways on me, but I didn't care. I was tired of stooping for nickels in the gutter.