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## SILENT NIGHTS

by

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### CHAPTER 1

Snow fell gently, quietly on the city. A dying sun stretched unseen beyond blanketing clouds, yawning a last time before sliding into bed. The gray city slipped further into twilight without notice. People and cars mumbled and rumbled home, to bars, towards whichever currently important destination. Street lamps flickered to life with the hum of an electric bug that called, unnoticed, to push away darkness. An old man, filled with spirits and unable to read the digital display of his watch, could not discern the gray of a wintry day from the darker night. At the intersection he stumbled away into the streets, then further on into the city.

At the corner of the intersection stood a kiosk of blue and silver with red lights heralding safety, directions and communications. The kiosk stood alone, a curved monolith too oval to be a cylinder, too quarter-moon to be an oval, flat at the bottom and front. At its center, sweeping back in organic fashion was a small platform and upon that

platform a touchscreen with virtual buttons resembling a keyboard. Above this, just above this, in holographic glory floated the disembodied head of the Statue of Liberty, New York's iconic mistress. She glowed enticing pale greens, the blue-greens of oxidized copper, her features softer than her true counterpart, full of youth and innocence with large wet eyes. Her designers had constructed her long ago so no woman felt threatened by her, instead feeling sisterhood when gazed upon. Every man felt the tug in their heart to protect her as a lover or sister.

Lady Liberty spoke, "Isn't this a glorious day?" Her mouth moved perfectly, more perfect than any human mouth could move. On she spoke, a loop of cute quotes spoken by ten thousand heads housed within ten thousand kiosks like this one spread throughout the city.

The kiosk's computer checked the city's network, brought forth data on current weather. Lady Liberty spoke, "Isn't the snow lovely? Let's rush home for some toasty warm cocoa!"

Hearing this, a passerby said to her friend, "I've not had cocoa since last Christmas!"

"Same here," said the friend, "let's rush to the café to get some!"

New York had Lady Liberty as its face, she was the city's hostess.

"Brrr! It's terribly chilly out here! Let's get inside!" she said.

Snow fell in large flakes.

More people passed by her.

"Oh! The snow is so lovely. This is good cuddling weather."

A gentleman bundled in a fine tan hounds tooth overcoat with large buttons and a pin of holly on the lapel approached the kiosk. He fingered the virtual keys of the touchscreen below Lady Liberty's head.

She looked at him, smiled kindly and said, "Hello."

She disappeared. In her place newly projected was a map of the city. The man worked the touchscreen and the holographic map zoomed in on his current location before highlighting in a yellow glowing line, a path to a nearby store. Working the touchscreen once more, he brought up a three dimensional holographic projection of his final destination. He eyed the immediate area, considering the surrounding buildings so as to acquaint himself with the neighborhood for later recognition.

Having committed the directions and appearance of the store to memory, the gentleman nodded to himself and stepped away from the kiosk.

After a moment without use, the directions the gentleman had accessed disappeared and Lady Liberty's head reappeared. She said, "Thank you and I do hope I've been helpful today," though the man had already gone.

Behind her eyes was a tiny, unseen camera and beyond that a network of monitors one story high and twenty feet across. Truly it was one large screen, but its use called for it to be broken up to hundreds of smaller displays sharing the space. Two officers of the NYPD policed these miniature cameras. One had seen the man in the hounds tooth overcoat, watched him get his directions and go. The officer then scanned the other areas of the screen, watching. Many such screens existed and their existence was public knowledge. Many cried out against them, but the screens remained. They were as much a

part of New York as the Statue of Liberty herself and showed no sign of going away any time soon.

And so almost all of New York was under the watchful eye of the police. Not all of New York, but most.

More people walked by the kiosk, shuffling in different directions towards different destinations.

Snow fell quietly.

After a moment of staring and smiling sweetly, Lady Liberty said, “My! Isn’t all this snow lovely?”

More than a few passersby agreed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Father Abigail, dressed in his cassock, stood outside an old stone church marveling at the snow. He had always been enchanted by snow, wondering at how quietly it came to the world. Often, it seemed, snow came at night without howling wind, without pitter-patter as rain, without herald. Snow was nature in meditation, he guessed, quiet and profound.

As he stood outside the doors of Saint Philomena, Father Abigail could not help himself and soon began humming softly the old Christmas favorite “Silent Night”. The youth choir had been singing that very song earlier in preparation for Christmas Eve mass just three days away. Father Abigail felt blessed by the presence of the young choir. It seemed so many in the younger generations cared nothing for religion and nothing for Christmas except presents and trees and lights. He wondered if all of humanity was repeatedly born lost, taking several decades to find their way home.

He held mass each night leading up to Christmas, feeling it gave every soul more chances to celebrate the holiday in church. He hadn't had to do much to convince his Cardinal to allow this, as they were good friends. And tonight's mass he had had the youth choir practice, leading the small congregation in a few hymns. The children had happily obliged. He hoped others hearing the children were as moved as he had been, moved enough to still be quietly humming long after mass had ended.

Saint Philomena hung in the sky behind him, its high walls a dark silhouette against gray clouds and slowly sifting snow. The church had been built nearly two centuries ago in the image of her far larger Gothic sisters and cousins in Europe, in every way a replica of medieval Christianity except in the large solar panels adorning her roof. She had also had many names since being built, but for the last thirty years or more she had been called The Church of Saint Philomena, named for the patron saint to the poor martyred as a virgin at the tender age of fourteen.

Father Abagail turned to look at the mini-cathedral. He eyed the few stained glass windows in the church that needed repair. He wondered where he would get the money for the repairs. He ran his fingers through his thinning dark brown hair and mumbled a few words of the song repeating itself in his head.

“All is calm... all is bright...”

The priest entered the church through the large oak doors. The interior was warm with solar-powered heat. The air in the church was often dry in mid-winter. Father Abagail swallowed to wet his throat.

The lighting within the church was also solar-powered. Father Abagail, though the church generated enough energy to power all the lights at all times, kept the lights

dim using only a few light panels here and there and plastic candles with false flickering flames. The result was that the church – much like the city on a snowy day – was perpetually on this side of twilight. He explained to others the low light was a matter of creating intimacy within the congregation and helped parishioners focus in prayer, reflection and meditation.

Some argued Father Abigail kept the lighting low because he was cheap. Had he been confronted on that theory, he would certainly disagree. But inwardly he would admit the truth of his thriftiness. He would often sell the small amount of energy the church produced to the city. Not that the small amount of energy did much of a service to the city, but money he received from the sale definitely benefited the church. He was hoping to do this very thing in the coming summer months to pay for, along with donations, the repairs to the stained glass windows.

He walked through the church, turning off the plastic candles. He walked by the pews that could hold some two hundred men, women and children. He mounted the elevated stage to stand behind the dais, craning his neck to eye the large statue there of a crucified Christ with elongated, Mannerist and bloody limbs. While admittedly a powerful image, Father Abigail had always found the statue grotesque. Since he had come to Saint Philomena he had made plans to rid the church of the gory statue and replace it with a replica of Michelangelo's *Piéta*. He had seen the real *Piéta* while on a European trip with his seminary. Not only was Michelangelo's statue not covered in gruesome wounds and blood, it was as powerful an image as any of Christ. More so, Father Abigail could argue, in that the *Piéta* was a quiet moment of a mother grieving for her son and anyone, man or woman, could sympathize with such loss. Anyone could

recall a moment within their life wherein they felt completely helpless at the loss of a loved one, whether that loved one was a parent or a child, a friend or a pet. All of humanity was stained with death. Everyone had felt small while in the presence of their own mortality until falling to their knees with the empty vassal of death in their arms and crying out to Heaven.

In contrast, relatively few people at this hour had ever witnessed, been subjected to or otherwise experienced a crucifixion except through statuary and illustration.

There were other aspects of the church that needed tending before he could replace the crucifixion, however. The windows, for instance. The windows needed repair.

Father Abigail sighed. He switched off the candles at the foot of the Savior. He heard a *thump* as though a weight had been dropped to the floor behind him. Shuffling feet followed. He turned, peering into the darkness of the church.

The doors at the far end of the church parted. The dark silhouette of a man exited through the doors. Father Abigail had not heard anyone enter, he had only seen a shadow leave.

The doors closed.

Father Abigail called out, "Hello?"

No answer came.

Father Abigail kept the doors of the church unlocked and welcoming at all hours. Only the doors of his rectory did he ever lock.

Though he knew the man had left, he was confused by the initial sound, the thumping sound that made him turn from his thoughts and peer into darkness. He

wondered if someone was there, hidden in the shadows. He wondered if he was alone. And he had the strangest feeling that he wasn't.

“Is someone there?” his voice quavered.

The feeling of someone present continued. Hairs raised on the priest's neck and arms. He stepped into darkness. Shadows grabbed at him. His eyes adjusted. The moon outside fought against the clouds. Silvery light pierced the church's windows like laser beams, muted and distorted through glass, through windows until bars of shadow black and moonlight white crisscrossed Father Abigail's path.

He stood in the aisle between the pews. On the floor before him crept a small puddle of blood. The priest strained, squinting to make out the shape of a man lying face down and dead on the floor, his blood leaking slowly out, spreading in every direction.

From the shadows, from out of darkness, from nothingness came a bearded man dressed in a yellowed tunic. Upon his head he wore a crown of thorns.

“I am the Alpha; I am Omega. I am the first and the last. And I have come to speak with you,” spoke Christ.

Father Abigail recoiled. He stepped back. His legs grew weak, threatening to give way under his weight. He reached out, grabbed the back of a pew and sat sideways so as to face the man that appeared to be The Savior Jesus Christ.

Christ approached, unimpeded by the body and blood. He sat in the pew behind Father Abigail.

The priest's mind worked. He wondered if this was all some unusually sick joke. He wondered if this was a crazed man seated near him. He had heard from a colleague that volunteered in psychological wards of hospitals about the many mental illnesses

plaguing humanity, especially the homeless – some to the extent of being delusional and taking on new identities, such as that of Christ. Father Abigail wondered if this was such a man. And yet some small part of him wondered if this was all very real.

Father Abigail leaned in, asking, “Are you...?” He was afraid to finish the question.

Christ smiled sweetly, unblinking, saying, “I am as I appear.”

Father Abigail could hardly believe this. Still he questioned the identity of this man. Still he wondered if this could truly be the one and only Christ. And if this Christ was truly The Christ, what could it mean?

The priest asked, “Is this the end of times?”

Christ’s brow furrowed briefly with thought. He said, “That is not for me to decide.”

Yet uncertain, the priest asked, “Could I help you in some way?”

Christ nodded. “Speak of what you have witnessed here tonight. Tell all that would listen.”

Father Abigail nodded. His eyes wandered to the body on the floor.

“Did you...?” again the priest was too afraid to finish his question.

“No,” Christ said. He hardly moved as he spoke, “No, no. I could not harm another.”

“Who is he?”

Christ considered the priest a moment with his unblinking eyes. He answered, “He is one of the wicked, a servant of mine brought him here.”

“Why here? Why foul the church? Why me?” The priest immediately feared having said something too challenging, potentially offensive to Christ.

Christ stood.

The priest stood, tried to back away but was blocked by another pew. His mouth worked. He tried to apologize but no sounds came forth.

Said Christ, “Speak of what you have witnessed here this night.”

Father Abigail nodded.

Christ, without moving, melted into shadows and was gone.

## CHAPTER 2

Mike stumbled out of the converted brownstone apartment and into the street. Morning had long ago broken and the clouds were thinning, being chased away by the sun. The light of day was made brighter as the sun reflected off the previous night's snowfall. Mike reached into the wool-lined brown leatherette coat and pulled forth a pair of sunglasses. He put them on over his eyes. His dark hair hung, stylish and messy, over the glasses.

He had been on winter vacation for a week now. He had spent all December looking forward to his time off from school. It would be another two years before he graduated and he was already sick of the routine high school provided, though he did well and his grades were always high.

He walked the noonday streets virtually alone until he came to a commercial district where cafes were filled with people on lunch breaks and a few shoppers getting themselves ready for Christmas.

Mike stopped before a drug store window where someone had set up a display of plastic toys and a home video game console. He didn't think the console quite belonged, not because he thought it an inappropriate gift, but because there were no bars on the window. With only glass separating the console from any passerby on the street, Mike was certain the console would soon be stolen. He couldn't understand how anyone could be so trusting, how someone couldn't think of theft. He wondered if, perhaps, the glass was shatter-proof or bomb-proof, but then not many drug stores could afford such luxuries.

The door to the drug store opened. Out of the store wafted Elvis Presley's honey-coated voice as he sang "Blue Christmas". With the music came an older woman and a younger girl that Mike recognized.

"Hey, Mikey!" greeted the girl as she saw Mike standing in front of the window.

"Hey, Chelsea," Mike replied with an awkward, nervous smile.

"You don't have Ms. Koger for English, do you?"

Mike shook his head, "No."

"Lucky you. She gave us reading material for the break. Can you believe that? Homework for Christmas! Talk about a Scrooge."

Mike shuffled his feet nervously. "Yeah, I got homework, too. It sucks."

"I know," sighed Chelsea. "What'd you get stuck with?"

"Ulysses."

Chelsea quickly realized she was being rude and introduced the elderly lady watching the exchange between the young ones. "Oh, hey, this is my Granma."

Mike Nodded, smiled and said, "Hi."

"Hello, Michael," Granma smiled back. "Aren't you handsome? Such a dark haired young man. Is your family Mediterranean?"

Mike shifted his weight. This question made him more nervous than he had already been, though he was not sure why. It seemed like such a personal question. He also felt as though he might be set up on a date any second now.

"Greek," he answered. "And some Brit and Irish."

"Ah!" said Granma. "You're a mutt like the rest of us!"

"Granma! Nobody cares about race or anything any more!" scolded Chelsea.

“I don’t care,” Granma defended. “I’m making small talk with you boyfriend.”

Mike blushed and looked down.

Chelsea growled, “He’s not my boyfriend!”

“Well, he ought to be. He’s cute!”

Wanting desperately to dissolve the situation, Chelsea said, “C’mon, Granma. Let’s go.”

“It was nice meeting you, Michael,” said Granma.

Mike nodded. He watched as the two ladies, young and old, walked away. When they were halfway down the block, Chelsea turned and ran back towards him. She stopped before him, panting.

“What are you doing for Christmas?” she asked.

Mike shrugged. “Probably just hangin’ out at home with my mom... or with friends.”

“You’re not still hanging out with those goons, are you?”

“Who?”

“You know who. Luke and Gunner. Those guys.”

Mike didn’t want to admit it in the face of Chelsea’s disapproval, but he also didn’t want to lie to her. He said, “Sometimes.”

“Well, you shouldn’t. Especially that Luke. He dropped out of school months ago! Who knows what he’s doing now? That Luke was always a trouble maker in school and I’ll bet he’s still causing trouble now, but out in the streets.”

“His name is Jazz now.”

“Huh?”

“He likes being called Jazz now.”

“Why? Is it like some stage name? Does he think he’s going to be the next great pop star?”

Mike shrugged again, “I dunno, he just likes it.”

“He’s no good.”

“You don’t know that. He’s a good guy, really. He just gets into a little trouble sometimes.”

“He’s a dropout and a bum.”

This angered Mike, but he refused to say anything. He didn’t want to argue with Chelsea and he didn’t want to be forced to defend his friend. He remained silent, lowered his head and looked at his feet.

Seeing Mike hurt, Chelsea said, “Sorry, Mikey. I came back to say if you had nothing else going on for Christmas, you’re welcome to come over to my place. Just send me an email or something. Or, you know, just drop on by. You know where I live, right?”

“Yeah, you live with your grandma, right? I was there a couple years ago for that other girl’s birthday party, Janet or whoever.”

“Janice. Yeah, we’re not friends any more. You know, when you start high school I guess you just are bound to grow apart from some friends.”

“Yeah, I guess,” he quietly admitted to himself he liked the idea of spending Christmas with Chelsea.

Chelsea smiled. “Kay, see ya.”

She ran back to her waiting grandmother.

Mike watched them go until they turned a corner and disappeared from sight. He looked at the console in the window once more before walking on, heading for Prospect Park where he was to meet Gunner and Jazz.

### CHAPTER 3

Jazz was strutting through the city wearing his stylish plasti-denim jacket adorned with safety pins of various sizes up and down the sleeves. His t-shirt and jeans hanged raggedly about his body. He wore expensive aviator glasses with mirrored lenses that had been imported from Germany and boosted at a booth in a mall. It had taken nearly ten minutes to get the security tag off and leave. It was two weeks before he returned to the mall in case security or an angry manager had been looking for him. The day brightened as the day dragged into afternoon and he was happy to have the sunglasses. And he was especially happy to have them now since his eye replacement surgery and the sunglasses could hide their light blue glow.

He walked with an exaggerated swagger. He walked through the flow of people-traffic. Stopping near a Lady Liberty kiosk on a corner, he looked at the vehicles moving by in the street before crossing against the light. Stepping up on the far curb, he came abreast an old dirty bum dressed in rags covering his dark, ruddy skin. The old man's hair was curled and natty and salt-and-pepper gray going slowly white. A beat-up blanket hung from his shoulders.

“Heya, George,” said Jazz.

The bum grunted.

Jazz brought forth a dark cigarette from inside his jacket and with it a sterling lighter. He flicked the lighter, sparking fire and pressed it to his cigarette.

The cigarette's smoke drifted to George. He asked, “Gotta 'nother one?”

“Hell no,” Jazz spat.

“You've always gotta 'nother one.”

Jazz sighed. He reached into his jacket, produced another cigarette and handed it to George along with the lighter.

George lit his cigarette, handed back the lighter. They walked on together, George coughing as the smoke agitated his bronchitis.

“How was the bridge last night?” Jazz asked.

“I didn’t sleep at the bridge last night. I don’t go to the Oak Street Bridge any more. It used to be a nice place to bed down. Now a respectable bum can’t go there for all the lowlifes.”

“They’re high-tech low-lifes,” defended Jazz.

“Buncha runaway kids is all they are. I don’t sleep there unless I have to, like if a storm’s comin’ or somethin’. Then I’ll go ask Bruce and he’ll usually set me up nice.”

They stopped at a corner and waited for traffic to thin to cross.

“Hey, you said once you liked tech stuff, right?” asked Jazz.

George grunted, “I guess.”

“Check this shit out.” Jazz pulled off his sunglasses to reveal his new eyes.

George looked, broke off the burnt end of the half-smoked cigarette and put the unsmoked half in a pocket. “What the hell’s that?”

“My new eyes. You like ’em?” Jazz replaced his sunglasses on his face.

“You get your eyes tinted?”

“Hell no, none of that fake Hollywood shit for me. They’re totally new eyes. I replaced the old ones with robotic ones.”

“You better be careful,” George warned. “Implants like that screams bank-roll and a poor street kid like you might be a good target for someone that decides to make a withdrawal on your ass.”

Jazz took a hard, long drag on his cigarette to finish it. His nose spit out the smoke while his fingers flicked the butt into the gutter. “That’s why I also got this.”

Jazz opened his right palm to reveal a crease of circular flesh. His muscles twitched and the false flesh folded away as a short barrel extended out from within his hand.

“Christ!” George cursed.

“It’s just a .380-caliber,” explained Jazz. “One shot, but that’s all I’ll need in a tight corner. The barrel pops out through the palm while the rest is housed in the arm.”

“I know what a pop-gun is.”

“Just thought I’d educate the elderly.”

“I know a lot more than you give me credit for, kid. And I know those things are illegal as shit.”

The barrel retracted into Jazz’s palm and the skin folded back over it. “The gun may be illegal, but so is everything I had to do to get the money to pay for all these mods.”

“I may be a dumbass old bum that mumbles to himself when he’s got no one else to talk to, but you’re fuckin’ crazy.”

Jazz laughed. “From you, old man, that’s a hell of a compliment.”

“What’d you do to afford those?”

“I got a job.”

“You didn’t get a job. No real job.”

“I sure as fuck did. Not a daily grind kind of thing. It was a one-time thing.”

“Doin’ what?”

Jazz thought of his instructions not to speak of the details of the job, but he was excited to tell someone. He looked around to make sure no one was too near them, making sure no one could hear them. He leaned close to George and said, “Hacking.”

“No shit?”

Jazz nodded.

“I thought I told you to stay away from that shit. Computers will be our ruination if given a chance.”

“Man is the golden mean of all things,” said Jazz. “And technology is the golden mean of Man. Learn to live with technology, old man, or become the new Missing Link, the new extinct hominid.”

George scoffed.

“What do you know? Computers are Man’s greatest invention. Computers are Man’s abstract thoughts expressed and put to work. Computers are the essence of the greatest parts of Man’s thinking. Coding is math made practical. There is no greater science than math. And no art expresses the systems and patterns of human thought and life and cycles as computers do. Maybe one day we’ll make something new, something greater, maybe something that transforms us into god-like ethereal star beings that can alter the universe with the mere touch of thought. But now, at this point in human history, computers are the greatest expression of human endeavor.

“If you knew anything about game theory and social constructs, you’d understand.”

George looked at Jazz a long time as they continued to walk. He said, “I won’t argue with you, kid. I won’t argue with your love and faith in science. But as much as computers can give us, they can also take away. I know about computers and science. I was workin’ on ‘em and in a big way since before you were even born, boy. They can’t save you from everythin’. They can be ruination sometimes. Be careful with what you do. That’s all I’m saying. Be careful.”

They walked to another corner and stopped. They looked at one another.

“You going to be over to the bridge tonight?” the old bum asked.

“For a little while,” said Jazz. “I’ve got plans with friends tonight, though so we won’t stay long.”

“Mike?”

“Yeah. We’re going over to The Roost tonight. They’re premierin’ this new game. It’s somethin’ big and Mike’s really been wantin’ to go so with the money I earned I bought us tickets.”

“That’s sweet of you,” George jibed.

A couple of hoverhogs cruised by. Their engines rattled George’s teeth. Jazz watched them pass, scowling. The machines’ riders sat proud, leathered. There was a time when bikers couldn’t ride in the winter, but hover technology had changed all that.

“You stayin’ at his place tonight, then?”

Jazz said, “Maybe I should. My mom’s not seen my new eyes yet. And I kind of left on bad terms this last time. Lots of screamin’. She’ll flip the next time she sees me and I don’t want to deal with that anymore. I doubt I’ll ever return.”

George remained quiet.

“You want to come along tonight?” Jazz asked. “We’ll make it a slumber party at Mikey’s. We’ll have ice cream and soda pop and gossip about all the boys we know.”

George chuckled. “I doubt Mike’s family would be so accommodatin’ and gracious as to let a bum into their home.”

“That’s probably best. I think Mikey’s spooked by you for some reason. He doesn’t hate you, but he gets a little nervous around you.”

“He’s not like us. That’s why,” George coughed.

“What do you mean, ‘not like us’?” Jazz stepped towards George aggressively, defiantly, and defensively.

“He has a home. We’re street trash. You’re constantly in and out of your place. I sleep under bridges, in dumpsters and on park benches. He’s from a different world. You’re his friend, but it’s only natural he’s scared of me.”

Two young girls, both about fifteen years in age, walked by dressed in tight clothing and clear plastic coats, their faces swimming in make-up. Jazz watched them intently. They saw him watching and giggled before hurrying away.

“Do you realize how young they were?” George asked.

“If you can’t find a good woman, raise one,” Jazz joked.

George spat in contempt. “You’re filthy.”

“If you like that one, you’ll love the one I heard last night.”

“I doubt that.”

“Ask me what the hardest part of eatin’ hairless pussy is.”

George shook his head. “No.”

“C’mon. Ask.”

“I said ‘no’. I don’t want to hear your filth, boy.”

“You’ve got no sense of humor, old man.”

“Oh, I got a sense of humor. I also got somethin’ called moral values. Ethics. I wouldn’t be surprised if you go to Hell for what you said about those two girls.”

Jazz pointed up at the sky. “Somebody up there decided a long time ago I’d be goin’ to Hell. At this point I’m just workin’ on getting’ a better seat at the dinner table down there.”

George didn’t respond. The two were quiet a moment. Finally, George said, “I’ll see you later.”

As George walked away, Jazz called, “I’ll see you when I see you, you fuckin’ worthless old bum.”

George didn’t turn around. He didn’t show he had even heard Jazz.

Jazz laughed and walked on towards Prospect Park.