

# SECRETS

*by Frederick Ramsay*

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## CHAPTER 1

The church huddled in a small grove of pine and oak set back from the road at the town's northern edge. Featured on postcards for decades, it was in great demand for weddings by Callend College women, area residents and, on occasion, visitors from as far away as Washington, DC. The previous vicar, in order to reduce the number of requests for those events from outsiders, imposed preconditions on its use. If you wished to be married in Stonewall Jackson Memorial Episcopal Church, you had to be a member in good standing for at least six months or you had to pay a user's fee of five thousand dollars. Every year, membership rose from January to June, then fell off precipitously.

Constructed entirely of local grey limestone, it contrasted sharply with the rest of Picketsville whose architecture leaned toward antebellum. Nineteenth century tastes dismissed limestone as ordinary and ill-suited for erecting a modern city. The only correct façade for a building, they believed, was brick. Some of the town's older buildings still displayed bullet holes chipped into salmon red bricks and acquired when the Union Armies began their descent down the Shenandoah Valley into the heart of Dixie.

At night, the church sank into the shadows cast by surrounding trees. On a moonless night like this one, it disappeared completely.

Waldo Templeton moved cautiously toward the church doors, jet black in the night's palette of grays. His shoes, dusty from the gravel path, grated against stone steps. He extended his right arm its full length and pushed gently on the right hand door with his fingertips. Not locked. He frowned. Why not locked? It swung silently inward. He could smell oil recently applied to its ancient hinges. He paused. The church often went unlocked. So many people had keys; it probably didn't make any difference. He moved forward to a second set of doors, his hand caressing their smooth glass surface. He pushed through them as well.

Starlight outside, black as a raven's wing within, and only a flickering red candle suspended over the Aumbry showing him which way to go. He fumbled to his right for the light switches. He hesitated and then withdrew his hand. If the doors weren't locked, better not turn on any lights. No one was supposed to be here at this hour anyway and light attracted attention. He might have been followed. No, no lights. He hesitated and then started forward again, submerged in black velvet darkness. He crept up the center aisle, his arms outstretched like a blind man. He stubbed his toe on one pew, banged his knee against another. He sucked in his breath and waited. Nothing stirred. His eyes adjusted to the dark and he moved forward again, a bit more confidently. He recognized the looming bulk of the organ to his right and could just make out the communion railing in front of him. But before he could steady himself on it, he tripped. This time he cursed and dropped to his knees. He held his breath, marking time with the pounding of his heart. He stood slowly and swung his head around, eyes boring into the unyielding

gloom, searching, listening for any sign of danger. He rubbed his shin and took three more steps. His hand touched the altar's cool marble and starched linen. Feeling his way along its smooth edge, he slipped behind it. He'd need the key.

The first bullet ripped through his shoulder, knocking his hand away from the altar and spinning him around. Before he could react, the second gave him a third eye and sent him reeling into the nineteenth century bas relief carved Reredos behind him. His slow decent to the red carpet left a matching smear on its white painted facing. The odor of cordite, like New Age frankincense, drifted upward to mingle with older high church incense ingrained in the ceiling's dark oak beams.

His killer flicked on a small Maglite and carefully retrieved two shell casings from the carpet, then knelt and rifled Waldo's pockets. The figure stood with a grunt and, flashlight upended on the altar, fumbled with a key ring, removed one, and pressed it into a wax container, first one side then the other. More key jingling and the ring and its keys were returned to Waldo's pocket. The wall clock by the open sacristy door read 11:03. Clad entirely in black, except for a splash of white at the throat, Waldo's executioner walked the length of the nave, slipped out the door, and pulled it to, making sure the lock snapped shut. The car sat parked out of sight on the church's auxiliary lot, well behind the building and nearby under a copse of oaks. The headlights wouldn't go on until the car bumped onto the main road.

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In the Middle Ages anyone on the run, in fear for his life, or simply in danger—if he were able to reach a church and place his hand on its altar—would then fall under the protection of the Church and, presumably, God. He would be granted Sanctuary and made safe—safe in a consecrated place, on holy ground. Felons fleeing the King's men

could gain a respite from their flight, perhaps just long enough to confess their sins, receive unction, and go to their maker shriven and clean. But for others, it bought time. Time for bribes to be paid, for innocence to be proven, or a covenant struck. Unfortunately, for Waldo Templeton, none of these possibilities materialized. He had managed to find Sanctuary of a sort, not the kind he sought, not one with permanence, and certainly not one that could save his life.

His problems began when Picketsville filled with news people, stringers, and hangers-on from around the country. All the major television networks had sent trucks and reporters to cover the robbery of five hundred million dollars in fine art from Callend College for Women the previous spring. It had made headlines on the national news. And then, with the establishment of an apparent link between the robbery and a terrorist cell, a second wave of media personnel washed in to become a beast in need of constant feeding. The Sheriff's Office and its laconic leader, Ike Schwartz, could not have kept it satisfied if they had tried. So they didn't. Reporters with network connections, local stations to supply and deadlines to meet, scoured the town looking for news—any news. In the feeding frenzy that followed, they overlooked very little.

Waldo should have known better. He should have holed up in his little town house and waited out the onslaught of media mania. Then, too, he had a run of bad luck. He went to the Crossroads Diner at ten o'clock for coffee as he always did and sat in his customary bench in a back booth. Buried in his paper, he failed to notice the commotion at the front of the diner. When a woman reporter with impossibly curly red hair arrived with her camera crew in tow to do a color piece on the locals, Waldo did not move. If only he had been sitting with his back to the door, or had not lowered his paper at that

precise moment, or if he had just this once resisted the urge to add caffeine to his system, he might still be alive. But for reasons known only to him and now forever lost, he remained seated, smiling, and staring into the camera's red eye, his blurred image broadcast on television stations across the country.

It is one of life's great ironies that critical events hang on small decisions made on the spur of the moment, decisions for the most part irrational and impulsive. Red lights are ignored, cocktails are consumed, drugs are sampled, a phone is left ringing—and people die. Most of our lives are played out as a series of these small, singular determinations, made without thought to the consequences they carry. And one by one they pile up, each knocking into another, into those of others, like dominos, until their effect is enormous. Lives are ruined; vengeance is sought, wars begun, and all because someone chose to turn right instead of left, or, in Waldo's case, to remain seated and smiling. Small decisions — massive changes — the Butterfly Effect.