

The Naked Face

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To the Women in my life -

Jorja

Mary

-and-

Natalie

Chapter One

At ten minutes before eleven in the morning, the sky exploded into a carnival of white confetti that instantly blanketed the city. The soft snow turned the already frozen streets of Manhattan to grey slush and the icy December wind herded the Christmas shoppers towards the comfort of their apartments and homes.

On Lexington Avenue the tall, thin man in the yellow rain slicker moved along with the rushing Christmas crowd to a rhythm of his own. He was walking rapidly, but it was not with the frantic pace of the other pedestrians who were trying to escape the cold. His head was lifted and he seemed oblivious to the passers-by who bumped against him. He was free after a lifetime of purgatory, and he was on his way home to tell Mary that it was finished. The past was going to bury its dead and the future was bright and golden. He was thinking how her face would glow when he told her the news. As he reached the corner of Fifty-ninth Street, the traffic light ambered its way to red and he stopped with the impatient crowd. A few feet away, a Salvation Army Santa Claus stood over a large kettle. The man reached in his pocket for some coins, an offering to the gods of fortune. At that instant someone clapped him on the back, a sudden

stinging blow that rocked his whole body. Some overhearty Christmas drunk trying to be friendly.

Or Bruce Boyd. Bruce, who had never known his own strength and had a childish habit of hurting him physically. But he had not seen Bruce in more than a year. The man started to turn his head to see who had hit him, and to his surprise, his knees began to buckle. In slow motion, watching himself from a distance, he could see his body hit the sidewalk. There was a dull pain in his back and it began to spread. It became hard to breathe. He was aware of a parade of shoes moving past his face as though animated with a life of their own. His cheek began to feel numb from the freezing sidewalk. He knew he must not lie there. He opened his mouth to ask someone to help him, and a warm, red river began to gush out and flow into the melting snow. He watched in dazed fascination as it moved across the sidewalk and ran down into the gutter. The pain was worse now, but he didn't mind it so much because he had suddenly remembered his good news. He was free. He was going to tell Mary that he was free. He closed his eyes to rest them from the blinding whiteness of the sky. The snow began to turn to icy sleet, but he no longer felt anything.

Chapter Two

Carol Roberts heard the sounds of the reception door opening and closing and the men walking in, and before she even looked up, she could smell what they were. There were two of them. One was in his middle forties. He was a big mother, about six foot three, and all muscle. He had a massive head with deep-set steely blue eyes and a weary, humourless mouth. The second man was younger. His features were clean-cut, sensitive. His eyes were brown and alert. The

two men looked completely different and yet, as far as Carol was concerned, they could have been identical.

They were fuzz. That was what she had smelled. As they moved towards her desk she could feel the drops of perspiration begin to trickle down her armpits through the shield of anti-perspirant. Frantically her mind darted over all the treacherous areas of vulnerability. Chick? Christ, he had kept out of trouble for over six months. Since that night in his apartment when he had asked her to marry him and had promised to quit the gang.

Sammy? He was overseas in the Air Force, and if anything had happened to her brother, they would not have sent these two mothers to break the news. No, they were here to bust her. She was carrying grass in her purse, and some loudmouthed prick had rapped about it. But why two of them? Carol tried to tell herself that they could not touch her. She was no longer some dumb black hooker from Harlem that they could push around. Not any more. She was the receptionist for one of the biggest psychoanalysts in the country. But as the two men moved towards her, Carol's panic increased. There was the feral memory of too many years of hiding in stinking, overcrowded tenement apartments while the white Law broke down doors and hauled away a father, or a sister, or a cousin. But nothing of the turmoil in her mind showed on her face. At first glance the two detectives saw only a young and nubile, tawny-skinned Negress in a smartly tailored beige dress. Her voice was cool and impersonal. 'May I help you?' she asked.

Then Lt. Andrew McGreavy, the older detective, spotted the spreading perspiration stain under the armpit of her dress. He automatically filed it away as an interesting piece of information for future use. The doctor's receptionist was up-tight. McGreavy pulled out a wallet with a worn badge pinned onto the cracked imitation leather, Lieutenant McGreavy, Nineteenth Precinct.' He indicated his partner. 'Detective Angeli. We're from the Homicide Division.'

Homicide? A muscle in Carol's arm twitched involuntarily. Chick! He had killed someone. He had broken his promise to her and gone back to the gang. He had pulled a robbery and

had shot someone, or - was he shot? Dead? Is that what they had come to tell her? She felt the perspiration stain begin to widen. Carol suddenly became conscious of it. McGreavy was looking at her face, but she knew that he had noticed it. She and the McGreavys of the world needed no words. They recognized each other on sight. They had known each other for hundreds of years.

'We'd like to see Dr. Judd Stevens,' said the younger detective. His voice was gentle and polite, and went with his appearance. She noticed for the first time that he carried a small parcel wrapped in brown paper and held together with string.

It took an instant for his words to sink in. So it wasn't Chick. Or Sammy. Or the grass.

'I'm sorry,' she said, barely hiding her relief. 'Dr. Stevens is with a patient.'

This will only take a few minutes,' McGreavy said. 'We want to ask him some questions.' He paused. 'We can either do it here, or at Police Headquarters.'

She looked at the two of them a moment, puzzled. What the hell could two Homicide detectives want with Dr. Stevens? Whatever the police might think, the doctor had not done anything wrong. She knew him too well. How long had it been? Four years. It had started in night court...

It was three am and the overhead lights in the courtroom bathed everyone in an unhealthy pallor. The room was old and tired and uncaring, saturated with the stale smell of fear that had accumulated over the years like layers of flaked paint.

It was Carol's lousy luck that Judge Murphy was sitting on the bench again. She had been up before him only two weeks before and had got off with probation. First offence. Meaning it was the first time the bastards had caught her. This time she knew the judge was going to throw the book at her.

The case on the docket ahead of hers was almost over. A tall, quiet-looking man standing before the judge was saying something about his client, a fat man in handcuffs who trembled all over. She figured the quiet-looking man must be a mouthpiece. There was a look about him, an air of easy confidence, that made her feel the fat man was lucky to have him. She didn't have anyone.

The men moved away from the bench and Carol heard her name called. She stood up, pressing her knees together to keep them from trembling. The bailiff gave her a gentle push towards the bench. The court clerk handed the charge sheet to the judge.

Judge Murphy looked at Carol, then at the sheet of paper in front of him.

'Carol Roberts. Soliciting on the streets, vagrancy, possession of marijuana, and resisting arrest.'

The last was a lot of shit. The policemen had shoved her and she had kicked him in the balls. After all, she was an American citizen.

'You were in here a few weeks ago, weren't you, Carol?'

She made her voice sound uncertain. 'I believe I was. Your Honour.'

'And I gave you probation.'

'Yes, sir.'

'How old are you?'

She should have known they would ask. 'Sixteen. Today's my sixteenth birthday. Happy birthday to me,' she said. And she burst into tears, huge sobs that wracked her body.

The tall, quiet man had been standing at a table at the side gathering up some papers and putting them in a leather attache case. As Carol stood there sobbing, he

looked up and watched her for a moment. Then he spoke to judge Murphy.

The judge called a recess and the two men disappeared into the judge's chambers. Fifteen minutes later, the bailiff escorted Carol into the judge's chambers, where the quiet man was earnestly talking to the judge.

'You're a lucky girl, Carol,' Judge Murphy said. 'You're going to get another chance. The Court is remanding you to the personal custody of Dr. Stevens.'

So the tall mother wasn't a mouthpiece — he was a quack. She wouldn't have cared if he was Jack the Ripper. All she wanted was to get out of that stinking courtroom before they found out it wasn't her birthday.

The doctor drove her to his apartment, making small talk that did not require any answers, giving Carol a chance to pull herself together and think things out. He stopped the car in front of a modern apartment building on Seventy-first Street overlooking the East River. The building had a doorman and an elevator operator, and from the calm way they greeted him, you would think he came home every morning at three am with a sixteen-year-old black hooker.

Carol had never seen an apartment like the doctor's. The living-room was done in white with two long, low couches covered in oatmeal tweed. Between the couches was an enormous square coffee table with a thick glass top. On it was a large chessboard with carved Venetian figures. Modern paintings hung on the wall. In the foyer was a closed-circuit television monitor that showed the entrance to the lobby. In one corner of the living-room was a smoked glass bar with shelves of crystal glasses and decanters. Looking out the window, Carol could see tiny boats, far below, tossing their way along the East River.

'Courts always make me hungry,' Judd said. 'Why don't I whip up a little birthday supper?' And he took her into the kitchen where she watched him skilfully put together a Mexican omelette, French-fried potatoes, toasted English muffins, a salad, and coffee. That's one of the advantages of being a bachelor,' he said. 'I can cook when I feel like it.'

So he was a bachelor without any home pussy. If she played her cards right, this could turn out to be a bonanza. When she had finished devouring the meal, he had taken her into the guest bedroom. The bedroom was done in blue, dominated by a large double bed with a blue checked bedspread. There was a low Spanish dresser of dark wood with brass fittings.

'You can spend the night here,' he said. 'I'll rustle up a pair of pyjamas for you.'

As Carol looked around the tastefully decorated room she thought, Carol, baby! You've hit the jackpot! This mother's looking for a piece of jailbait black ass. And you're the baby who is gonna give it to him.

She undressed and spent the next half hour in the shower. When she came out, a towel wrapped around her shining, voluptuous body, she saw that the motherfucking ofay had placed a pair of his pyjamas on the bed. She laughed knowingly and left them there. She threw the towel down and strolled into the living-room. He was not there. She looked through the door leading into a den. He was sitting at a large, comfortable desk with an old-fashioned desk lamp hanging over it. The den was crammed with books from floor to ceiling. She walked up behind him and kissed him on the neck. 'Let's get started, baby' she whispered. 'You got me so horny I can't stand it' She pressed closer to him.

'What are we waitin' for, big daddy? If you don't ball me quick, I'll go out of my cotton-pickin' mind.'

He regarded her for a second with thoughtful dark grey eyes. 'Haven't you got enough trouble?' he asked mildly. 'You can't help being born a Negro, but who told you you had to be a black dropout pot-smoking sixteen-year-old whore?'

She stared at him, baffled, wondering what she had said wrong. Maybe he had to get himself worked up and whip her first to get his kicks. Or maybe it was the Reverend Davidson bit. He was going to pray over her black assf reform her, and then lay her. She tried again. She reached between his legs and stroked him, whispering, 'Go, baby. Sock it to me.'

He gently disengaged himself and sat her in an armchair. She had never been so puzzled. He didn't look like a fag, but these days you never knew. 'What's your bag, baby? Tell me how you like to freak out and I'll give it to you.'

'All right,' he said. 'Let's rap.'

'You mean --talk?'

'That's right.'

And they talked. All night long. It was the strangest night that Carol had ever spent. Dr Stevens kept leaping from one subject to another, exploring, testing her. He asked her opinion about Vietnam, ghettos, and college riots. Every time Carol thought she had figured out what he was really after, he switched to another subject. They talked of things she had never heard of, and about subjects in which she considered herself the world's greatest living expert. Months afterwards she used to lie awake, trying to recall the word, the idea, the magic phrase that had changed her. She had never been able to because she finally realized that there had been no magic word. What Dr. Stevens had done was simple. He had talked to her. Really talked to her. No one had ever done that before. He had treated her like a human being, an equal, whose opinions and feelings he cared about.

Somewhere during the course of the night she suddenly became aware of her nakedness and went in and put on his pyjamas. He came in and sat on the edge of the bed and they talked some more. They talked about Mao Tse-tung and hula hoops and the Pill. And having a mother and father who had never been married. Carol told him things she had never told anybody in her life. Things that had been long buried deep in her subconscious. And when she had finally fallen asleep, she had felt totally empty. It was as though she had had a major operation, and a river of poison had been drained out of her.

In the morning, after breakfast, he handed her a hundred dollars.

She hesitated, then finally said, 'I lied. It's not my

birthday.'

'I know.' He grinned. 'But we won't tell the judge.' His tone changed. 'You can take the money and walk out of here and no one will bother you until the next time you get caught by the police.' He paused. 'I need a receptionist. I think you'd be marvellous at the job.'

She looked at him unbelievably. 'You're putting me on. I can't take shorthand or type.' 'You could if you went back to school' Carol looked at him a moment and then said enthusiastically, 'I never thought of that. That sounds groovy.' She couldn't wait to get the hell out of the apartment with his hundred dollars and flash it at the boys and girls at Fishman's Drug Store in Harlem, where the gang hung out. She could buy enough kicks with this money to last a week.

When she walked into Fishman's Drug Store, it was as though she had never been away. She saw the same bitter faces and heard the same hip, defeated chatter. She was home. She kept thinking of the doctor's apartment. It wasn't the furniture that made the big difference. It was so clean. And quiet It was like a little island somewhere in another world. And he had offered her a passport to it. What was there to lose? She could try it for laughs, to show the doctor that he was wrong, that she couldn't make it.

To her own great surprise, Carol enrolled in night school.

She left her furnished room with the rust-stained washbasin and broken toilet and the torn green window shade and the lumpy iron cot where she would turn tricks and act out plays. She was a beautiful heiress in Paris or London or Rome, and the man pumping away on top of her was a wealthy, handsome prince, dying to marry her. And as each man had his orgasm and crawled off her, her dream died. Until the next time.

She left the room and all her princes without a backward glance and moved back in with her parents.

Dr. Stevens gave allowance while she was studying. She finished high school with top grades. The doctor was there on graduation day, his grey eyes bright with pride. Someone believed in her. She was somebody. She took a day job at

Nedick's and took a secretarial course at night. The day after she finished, she went to work for Dr. Stevens and could afford her own apartment

In the four years that had passed Dr Stevens had always treated her with the same grave courtesy he had shown her the first night. At first she had waited for him to make some reference to what she had been, and what she had become. But she had finally come to the realization that he had always seen her as what she was now. All he had done was to help her fulfil herself. Whenever she had a problem, he always found time to discuss it with her. Recently she had been meaning to tell him about what had happened with her and Chick and ask him whether she should tell Chick, but she kept putting it off. She wanted her Dr. Stevens to be proud of her. She would have done anything for him. She would have slept with him, killed for him...

And now here were these two mothers from the Homicide Squad wanting to see him.

McGreavy was getting impatient 'How about it, miss?' he asked.

'I have orders never to disturb him when he's with a patient,' said Carol. She saw the expression that came into McGreavy's eyes. 'I'll ring him.' She picked up the phone and pressed the intercom buzzer. After thirty seconds of silence, Dr. Stevens's voice came over the phone. 'Yes?'

'There are two detectives here to see you, Doctor. They're from the Homicide Division.'

She listened for a change in his voice ... nervousness... fear. There was nothing. 'They'll have to wait,' he said. He went off the line.

A surge of pride flared through her. Maybe they could panic her, but they could never get her doctor to lose his cool. She looked up defiantly. "You heard him," she said.

"How long will his patient be in there?" asked Angeli, the younger man.

She glanced at the clock on the desk. 'Another twenty-five