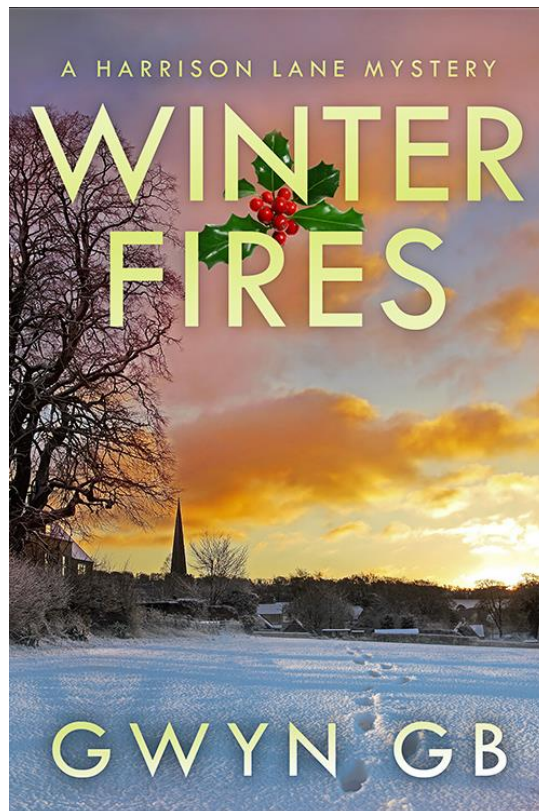


# WINTER FIRES

The first three chapters. A preview for Gwyn GB readers' club members only.



*By Gwyn GB*

## CHAPTER ONE

### December 17th

They waited for the Christmas tree lights and the flood light which illuminated the tall church spire to turn off. 11pm on the dot. The lights were on a timer. They'd been watching and seen nobody anywhere near the building for the previous hour and a half. With the lights off, it would be difficult for any passer-by to see them as they slipped up the path towards the side entrance of the church. The moon was smothered by clouds, giving no natural light. That suited them just fine.

They could be a ghost from a Victorian Dickensian novel walking, head bowed, through the dark graveyard. Dressed all in black from head to toe. A long black coat, black leather gloves, a black scarf across their face. The only nod to modernity was the head covering. It wasn't a top hat. It was a black knitted beanie.

Despite its midnight hue, their clothing didn't look out of place that cold winter's night. The wind was biting. A northerly that was due to bring snow before the week was out. They weren't interested in the weather, but it had kept others indoors.

There was just one thing on the intruder's mind. In their left hand they carried a bag which sloshed and clunked as they strode up the path, feet scrunching on the gravel in accompaniment. It had some tools, a heavy duty garden refuse sack, and a can of diesel inside. In their right hand was a set of keys. They had no need to break in to enter.

Their eyes darted around the churchyard. Had they seen movement in the shadows? They stopped. Stilling their feet on the gravel. Listening intently and scanning every inch of the graveyard. Every headstone. Every mawkish religious monument to the departed. They'd been waiting patiently in the darkness to ensure that the place was empty, and in that time, their eyes had grown accustomed to the lack of light.

There it was again. A movement to the left. They tensed. Excuses had been well

rehearsed should they bump into anyone, and so they ran through the lines quickly in their head.

Then they saw a pair of green eyes staring back and, with an annoyed flick of its tail, a black cat slipped away behind a gravestone.

The intruder let out a breath of relief and finished the last few steps to the church door. They weren't sure which key it was, so they'd tried several before feeling the lock give way and the rotor slide round. Within seconds, they had slipped inside.

Behind them, the graveyard returned to the sole ownership of the dead.

They knew where the silver was kept, locked away in the sacristy. There were keys for the cupboard on the ring, and they'd toyed with the idea of taking it, making the whole thing look like a robbery, but that would have defeated one of the objectives. They needed to make a clear statement. Let the others know they were coming for them. They wanted fear to find its way into their hearts and souls. A fear that couldn't be quenched by their religion. A fear begotten from a sin that could never be forgiven.

It was dark inside the church and the intruder couldn't turn on the lights in case someone saw them. They fumbled in the bag for the head torch they'd brought and pulled it over the top of their hat. When they were sure it was firmly in place, they'd switched it on, sending a beam of white light out in front of them. The light illuminated the pulpit with its Christmas tree sentinels and holly decorations, sending shadows leering up the surrounding walls. They had no fear of this place. Only hatred.

They took the can of diesel out of the bag and left it on the front pew. Then moved down the aisle, heading for the small door tucked away on the left side. Few noticed this door. It was old and small, requiring most people of modern height to duck in order to go through. It was also kept locked. This was not a door for the congregation to enter. Not a place that most people would want to visit. Behind that door were stone steps down into the

bowels of the church, where the rich and the privileged spent eternity waiting for the revelation.

The intruder tried a few of the keys on the ring before finally finding the right one. The lock didn't give as easily as the side door had. It was rarely used, but eventually it surrendered. The door squeaked on its hinges when they pushed it open, a sound which seemed to fill the big flint stone church as though calling out a warning to its guardians. Its efforts would go to waste.

The head torch illuminated the narrow flight of stone steps descending into the darkness and highlighted the dust motes which floated away in the breeze of the door opening. Tiny orbs which guided them downwards.

The air was musty and stagnant. The occupants of this chamber didn't need to breathe, and there was no ventilation to circulate and freshen the atmosphere. The corridor was narrow, only just wide enough to fit a coffin down - as long as you weren't a large corpse. As they walked along, they passed sealed chambers with ancient name plaques announcing the residents. Lord and Lady Weston, who had passed in the late 1800s. Sir Robert Mackenzie, who had apparently served his God, King, and country before making his final journey through the floor of the church and into the crypt. The intruder wasn't interested in any of them.

They pressed forward into a large open area at the end, where coffins lay on stone shelves around a horseshoe shaped chamber. Somewhere among these unsuspecting souls lay a devil's corpse. A master con artist who had fooled congregations for decades with his false piety and benevolence. The Bishop Peter Warriner, who unfortunately had died before justice could be served on him, but would not escape his trial.

Most of the caskets were old, pre-World War II, so it was easy to spot the modern interloper. Thankfully, it was on the middle shelf. Easy to reach.

They took the tools from the bag. First, they tested the lid in case it was unsealed. It didn't move and so they looked for the locking mechanism at the foot. This would need to be turned to release the lid. The other caskets around it had simply been nailed shut. Once the lock had been turned, they steeled themselves for a moment before prising open the lid, covering their mouth and nose with the scarf and taking a few deep breaths.

The stench of formaldehyde and rot oozed out like a thick soup of gagging miasma. As it hit them, they stepped back, but the impact was minimal. Their sense of taste and smell had started to disappear a couple of weeks ago and, for once, this misfortune served them well. The Bishop had been dead for some time and the decomposition and all its gasses had been trapped inside the sealed coffin. But the intruder was immune to him in death, as well as in life.

They stepped forward to peer inside and were relieved to see the body wasn't a watery mush, but had started to mummify in the dry atmosphere. The skin was brownish-black, his face like a ghastly sunken skull covered in papier mâché. The body was dressed in the vestments of his clerical rank, a robe with a stole, discoloured by bodily fluids, and a large cross hanging around the neck and resting on the chest.

The intruder took the large garden waste sack out of the bag and began to feed the body into it. They had to be careful to avoid the corpse falling apart with barely anything to hold it together, but eventually the earthly remains of Bishop Warriner were inside the bag. They heaved it free, not caring to show any respect.

They could have resealed the casket, barely left a trace of what had actually gone on here, but then it wouldn't send its message. Instead, they took some wire cutters from the bag and looked inside the garden sack for the Bishop's right hand. Without any emotion, the desecrator cut three fingers from it and returned the fingers to the casket. The rest of Bishop Warriner, they dragged unceremoniously back up the narrow corridor and into the church,

leaving the garden sack by the side door ready to leave.

The intruder returned to the main body of the church and picked up the can of diesel. They began to splash it over the wooden pews where countless sinners had sat hoping to find guidance and resurrection from a man more flawed than they. A man who had hidden behind his pulpit and his God and preached at them week after week. They poured the diesel over the altar cloth, the Christmas tree, the poinsettia displays, and the wooden nativity scene at the back. Then, one by one, they lit matches and threw them at the diesel. Time after time, relishing the whoosh of blue flame as it caught light. They'd have liked to stand and watch but knew the flames and smoke would quickly develop and quite apart from it not being safe, people might be alerted. They had to make their escape. There was still so much to do.

The intruder slipped out the side door with their bag of tools and the garden waste sack, locking it behind them. Then they made their way back up the graveyard path, their breathing more laboured with the heavier load. Before they left, they took something from the carryall. It was inside a clear sealed bag, isolated so as not to contaminate it with any of their DNA from the tools.

They knew where the CCTV camera pointed and so stayed close to the wall, hiding in the shadows, before finally reaching the main door to the church. There, they placed the clay doll at the entrance and melted back into the darkness.

As they drove away, the first plumes of grey were beginning to escape and the smoke alarms inside were screeching their warnings. By the time the fire crews arrived, there would be considerable damage. Perhaps it might even spread to the roof. The hypocrisy of their Christian Christmas would have to take place somewhere else.

## Chapter Two

### December 17th

Justin Black had been getting himself ready for bed. This was not a long process. Justin liked his routines. He would shower in the morning, ready for the day ahead, and just have a small wash prior to retiring for the night. He liked to have a hot chocolate before bed. Drunk up to an hour prior to sleep in order to ensure that he wasn't going to get up in the night to use the toilet. At just gone sixty, Justin's bladder was not as robust as it had once been.

He'd retired from the clerical job where he'd given the best years of his life, although if he had to be honest in front of the Lord, Justin would admit it was redundancy rather than a conscious decision to leave. The only positive from the whole experience was that his length of service meant he got a nice tidy pay off.

Nowadays, Justin was able to dedicate his time to his community, apart from the part-time role he had at the local supermarket, where he helped with the shelf re-stocking and occasionally worked the tills. The job came with a decent staff discount for his purchases and so the measly wages he received each week went much further when it came to his weekly shop.

Justin had never found a partner in life. For one thing, it had taken him until his thirties to realise that his lack of attraction to women—which was reciprocated, was down to his inherent low levels of libido and a passing preference for men. Justin was still a virgin and felt no great regret or need to change that status quo.

His passion, and the main focus of his life, was the Church. Justin had been a choirboy at the village church of All Saints and had continued his dedication throughout his life. He could count on one hand the number of times that he'd missed a Sunday service. One

was because he'd come down with the flu, which resulted in two weeks of forced absence, but was made better by a visit from the Vicar, who blessed him and gave him strength.

Another time, his mother had been dying in the hospice. The doctors had told him she was unlikely to last the next hour and so he'd stayed with her, holding her hand, reading passages from the bible and praying. As it turned out, he could have gone to church. She clung on into the early hours of the next morning and slipped from this world when he'd finally given up and was tucked up in bed at home. Covid had also put paid to a couple of services, but thankfully the Vicar was quick to get up and running with the online alternative and so although he hadn't been able to visit the Church with the others, he did at least feel an internet connection to his God.

Justin had lived a 'small' life. No foreign travel, one full-time employer, and he'd never moved further than a stone's throw from the church of All Saints where he'd been baptised. His mother's old cottage had been his home from birth. But he was content, and never more so than in the last few years when he'd become a Verger. The role came with responsibilities. He welcomed the congregations in, supported the Vicar in the planning of church events, and he oversaw the Sexton with the maintenance of the graveyard and church building. Whatever was required, Justin was always happy to do.

One advantage of his little cottage was that it stood across the road from the Church itself. He could see it from his bedroom window and sit in his old armchair in the living room downstairs; looking across to the wooden entrance gate to the graveyard, that was framed behind by the grey stone bulk of the nave. If he wanted to see the tower, then that required a bit of contortion, bending forward and looking up and to the left. What mattered was that his church filled the windows of his little home. He couldn't wish for a better view.

It was why, when Justin was just drifting off to sleep in his dark bedroom, the sound of smoke alarms made him jar to attention. His eyes shot open and the black darkness that



he'd earlier closed them to was now freckled with orange flickers.

His heart jumped into his throat, and he flung himself out of bed and over to the window. When he drew the curtain back, a howl of pain came from his gut. His beloved church was on fire.

As he pulled on some clothes, shoving his feet into shoes, he called 999 on the small mobile phone he'd bought so that the vicar could keep in touch. He shouted a command to the operator to send the fire brigade to All Saints as quickly as possible and then ended the call. He had no time to chat.

He didn't register anything else as he ran across the road and into the graveyard. Through the nave windows the orange flames danced and mocked. The devil's work destroying their beloved church. His hands shook with adrenaline as he found the right key and plunged it into the main door lock. There were fire extinguishers in the entrance. He could use them to keep the flames back while he waited for the fire engines to come.

As he wrenched the doors open, thick black smoke billowed out, making him bend double, coughing. His eyes stung. He felt like vomiting, but he pressed forward.

Justin grabbed the nearest fire extinguisher and pulled its pin out. He'd been on the fire warden course last year. He knew exactly what to do.

What he hadn't been taught. Or maybe he'd forgotten. Was that by opening the big doors into the main building, he fanned the fire. Feeding it with fresh oxygen. The wind funnelled through the entranceway, spread its sparks and flames to more of the wooden interior, and pushed the flames upwards so that they licked at the delicious oak roof struts that had been cut and dried centuries ago.

Justin had God on his side. He was working for the good of his community. For his Church. For the one constant that had never failed him in his life. He ran into the smoke, pointing the extinguisher at the wooden pews which were burning like the Guy Fawke's

bonfires just a few weeks ago. When the first canister ran out, he headed back to the entrance for a fresh one. Only the smoke had made him confused. He found himself at the altar. The opposite end of the nave from the exit.

Something in his memory told him to get down on the floor and crawl. Keep low, try to get under the smoke. But the noxious fumes had already poisoned his brain, made his eyes water, and filled his lungs. Even crawling became too much effort and he'd sunk onto the stone floor, coughing and wheezing. His body running out of oxygen.

He made one last effort to try to rise. To save his church, but the beams in the ceiling had started to burn through and begun to rain down large red-hot embers onto his back. His hair and jumper caught light, and he was too weak to even try to roll to put out the flames.

Justin Black died in the epicentre of the blaze. He left this earth with no regrets. He died a hero, attempting to save the one thing he had truly loved in this life. For him, it was his biggest achievement.

## CHAPTER THREE

**December 18<sup>th</sup>**

Dr Harrison Lane had fallen asleep to the sound of Mariah Carey's *All I want for Christmas is You*, which he'd already heard at least four times that evening. Somebody at the party in the flat downstairs was clearly making a play for a fellow reveller; although Wham's *Last Christmas* had also been top of the repeat plays, so there was no telling what state their love life was actually in.

Harrison had forgotten about the party. His neighbour did tell him a few weeks ago, but it had disappeared in the melee of cases and personal revelations. He'd even been invited, despite the fact they'd barely spoken to each other over the years. Not because the neighbour was unsociable, but because their paths had rarely crossed and Harrison had never needed to borrow a cup of sugar or to collect a parcel. He guessed it was more to keep him sweet than because he actually wanted to toast Christmas with him. If he'd been at the party, he couldn't complain about the noise.

He didn't complain. He was so wiped out after a busy week in Yorkshire, that with the help of the thick industrial floorboards which separated his Docklands penthouse flat from those below, what noise did leach into his bedroom wasn't sufficient to keep him awake, he just wished that someone would make Mariah's wish come true so she could take a break too.

His only regret was that he didn't fall asleep next to the delicious brunette forensics officer, Dr Tanya Jones. After he'd returned to London, he'd toyed with the idea of heading over to her flat instead of his own, but he was not a man who put his own wishes above the needs of someone else. He was exhausted. If he was going to give his best to the victims of the Suffolk church attacks, then sleep was what his tired brain needed. Instead, he'd made do

with a video call and the knowledge that in just a few days' time they would be spending Christmas Day together. Maybe even Christmas Eve if he played his cards right. That was a pleasant thought to drift off to sleep on.

WINTER FIRES OUT DECEMBER 3RD