

Chapter 1

on dangerous ground

And their war began.

The stretch limousine exploded, became a time bomb moving at eighty miles per hour.

I verified the detonation in my side-- view mirror. Its beautiful fire lit up the express lane on a humid night, the deadly cacophony forty yards behind me on I-95. The energy from that blast rolled through me, rattled both sides of the interstate and adjacent roads like we were in a San Francisco earthquake. Brake lights came alive in an abrupt chorus. Behind me, beyond that fiery limousine, four lanes of interstate crowded with cars, trucks, and motorcycles screeched to a halt, too late for speed demons to swerve and avoid flying debris.

I kept going.

The target was dead. The impossible mission was completed in less than forty-eight hours.

The corrupt and elusive con man inside the limo had been living a life of caviar and champagne, bodyguards at his side, men who were paid well and trained to shoot to kill. He was a man who didn't hesitate to take his enemies to the swamps and feed them to the gators.

A grifter named Arizona had been one of his problems.

And the man named Hopkins had become one of hers.

All I knew was what she had told me. And that wasn't much. The less the better.

What mattered was that deadly situation had been rectified.

The remote trigger that had caused that blast was inside my gloved hand. I dropped it, pressed down on the throttle, hit the century mark, moved from right lane to left lane to right lane, threaded traffic like a needle, became a fast-- moving shadow vanishing down I-95.

In this gritty world, people called me Gideon. A biblical name made famous by an adjudicator in the Book of Judges. That Gideon was also known as Jerub-Baal. Destroyer. Mighty Warrior. I was Gideon. Not sent by God. Employed by those who thought they were.

I was a hired gun paid to do what people wouldn't do for themselves.

This has been my vocation since I was seven years old. Since I aimed a gun at an angry man they called Midnight. I had killed that man before I had been given the truth about what he was.

Since that day, I'd been on the run, reared in brothels, lived in red light districts, had been taken into a world of retribution and learned more than two dozen ways to end a life, all for a price.

Using a block of C-4 and a remote control wasn't even high on the goddamn list.

Late evening, the darkness of my bike and clothing mixed with the cruelty in the night.

I accelerated and felt like I was moving faster than the speed of sound, then slowed when I caught up and mixed with the next wave of fast--moving traffic on I-95, became a law-abiding commuter as I signaled and faded onto the next exit, took the streets, rode toward the causeways, breezed through city traffic, engine rumbling, balmy night air on my skin. Gun inside my messenger bag. Riding a Streetfighter. Trellis frame. Huge fork clamps. Solid performance. I sped toward the area called Aventura, hurried to meet my sponsor.

The international grifter named Arizona had arrived in the U.S. and was somewhere down here in Florida. The Hopkins job was done, but now I needed her assistance, had to work out my own problems. Problems that could have me sleeping six feet under.

Four days ago, after vanishing for almost a year, Arizona had resur-- faced and sent a message. A job offer. The message had been a cryptic text, had come from an untraceable phone and was delivered to a temporary account on Gmail, one of a dozen we had set up for communicating. That particular account hadn't been used since I'd seen her in London. I'd gone to the Apple store in Minnesota's Mall of America, the country's largest retail and entertainment complex. If the IP addresses were traced, it would lead to that store. I blended with the Mac heads wore a baseball cap and shades, my face always down and away from the cameras.

I logged on to a laptop and checked my messages.

That con woman had sent me an encrypted message that gave me a location on the edges of Miami. Encryptions. Countersurveillance. Rendezvous points. Wire transfers.

It was the language and lifestyle of killers and cons.

Within the next few hours, I was on a flight heading to the land of gators.

When I had landed in Fort Lauderdale, Arizona had arranged what I needed. Ducati Streetfighter, black motorcycle helmet, racing gloves. All that and a messenger bag that was weighed down by a nine, two extra clips, a remote, and something that would blow my target's mind.

I took a deep breath, pulled up my face shield, and cruised.

Starbucks was on the corner of Biscayne Boulevard and Concourse Circle Drive. Inside a plaza dotted with palm trees and filled with BMWs, Hummers, Bentleys, and Benzes. This section of South Miami looked like a dealership for new and preowned luxury cars.

The competition of capitalism continued despite the economic downturn.

I circled the well-lit strip mall twice before I paused on that prime chunk of real estate.

It was a parking lot that covered all the blood that had soaked into the soil. Over a century ago, the Seminoles and the U.S. fought over this land, a bloody war that might have been the deadliest and costliest of the Indian wars, from the point of view of the U.S. of A.

The sound of gunfire and cannon booms had been replaced with the hum of cappuccino machines and the purr of extravagant automobiles. The scent of war was now the aroma of the perfect latte.

As soon as I headed inside, my cellular vibrated. It was a text message: FUNDS TRANSFERRED.

I deleted that message and moved on, looked out at a warm night that thieving man thought he would live to see. But someone with anger in their heart and money in their pockets had other plans.

Inside was like Antarctica, the AC blowing on high. The noise level was in the red, a dozen multilingual conversations being trapped by glass and walls. Cubans had conversations about one Castro in their homeland being replaced by another Castro, argued that the free health care and free education wasn't enough to make them remain a *Fidelista* and things needed to change in a land where Cubans couldn't own cell phones legally and computers were prohibited; the Cubans sipped five-dollar coffees and argued over the need to *defender el socialismo*. Next to them, groups of elderly Jewish men discussed a meeting for Holocaust survivors. Add to that chatter the nonstop whirr of the machines making lattes and cappuccinos, the din of jazz being piped in, people yapping on cellular phones, others tapping on laptops, listening to music or videos sans headphones.

Hairs stood up on my neck. Like in London. It felt like I was being watched.

I went into the bathroom, had to. Outside I was cool. But anxiety clung to me, shook me like a winter's chill. For a moment it felt like I was about to lose control. Another nightmare. I'd had a few since Antigua. Images that attacked me while I was wide awake. I saw the dead. Faces I'd been paid to put in the ground. And I saw the faces of those who had tried to do the same to me. Standing behind them all, in the shadows, his face unclear but his silhouette unforgettable, was the man I had killed when I was seven. He was nothing more than a shadow.

The mercenary they called Midnight. The first man I had killed. My father.

My life was a haunted house filled with many ghosts.

Somebody tapped on the door and I pulled the nine-millimeter out of my backpack. I called out that the bathroom was occupied. Paused. Whoever was out there walked away. The police wouldn't leave. Neither would the FBI. Both would announce they had come for me.

I took out my iPhone. Dialed a number in Powder Springs.

I wanted to check up on Catherine and the boys, Steven and Robert. Catherine was the woman who had raised me. Robert's mother had been killed because of my vocation. Steven was the boy Catherine called her son. But I knew that was a lie. Everything had been a lie.

No one answered, but the answering machine kicked on.

I didn't leave a message. I blocked my number and never left messages, not there.

I splashed water on my face, wiped my skin down with a paper towel, and went outside.

The hunter had been hunted before, more than once.

I spied the room. Cubans sipping cappuccino. Jewish women doing the same. A teenaged guy wearing Dockers and black sandals was eyeing the olive complexion of a blond woman seated at the next table, her pink button-down shirt and ripped jeans not enough to mask a body that could lure most men straight to the gates of Hell.

I sat at a back table, my back to the wall. Darkness masked what had been blue skies and puffy white clouds. Nighttime humidity rose as I waited, my anxiety not betraying me.

A Maserati whipped up under the lights, pulled into the lot, and found an open space between my Streetfighter and a 7-series BMW. The Gran Turismo was beautiful. Gray coupe, red leather seats. It was her. That was her mode. Had been her style since she was coming up as a grifter in North Hollywood, back when she was a neophyte in the con game. She'd come up from sleeping on the streets to sleeping in penthouses. Had moved from Hyundai to Maserati.

Every time I read about a major scam, it felt like it was her doing. Maybe I was just hoping it was her criminal mind in full swing. I kept telling myself that it didn't matter, but no matter where I was in the world, no matter what job I was on, no matter whose bed I was in, no matter who was in my bed, when all was said and done, my mind always went back to her.

I needed her for her connections to the conniving world of high-tech cons and criminals.

Someone out there knew about me, some unseen foe existed, someone who had tracked my movements around the world, someone who had sold my information to a problem I'd had in Detroit, and that information was then passed on to other killers.

Those killers were dead, but the information was alive.

Arizona eased out of her Maserati Granturismo and I couldn't stop my schoolboy smile.

A part of me I couldn't control would always want her.

Arizona's back was to me at first, her right hand holding her cellular to her ear. Her hair was long and dyed light brown with highlights, hung over her shoulders. She glanced toward the boulevard and I saw she had on dark shades with wide lenses, shades that matched the dark brown blouse she wore, a blouse that probably had hints of her lacy bra showing hints of her soft breasts.

I spied out at the parking lot, made sure she wasn't trailed. Force of habit. Then I checked the room again. The teenaged guy wearing Dockers had made contact with the pretty blond woman in the pink button-down shirt and ripped jeans. He had scooted his chair closer to her table, smiled at her as she blushed at him.

Arizona kept her eyes on the boulevard.

She had on four-inch heels made by a designer who put red soles on all of his shoes. One glance at the Maserati and Louboutins and you'd think she had matriculated from one of the best schools in the country, maybe the prestigious Miss Porter's up in Connecticut.

Arizona glanced back toward the coffeehouse, a serious look on her Filipina flesh, a walking enigma who could break a man's heart or empty every dime he had in his portfolio. She looked extraordinary, possessed an otherworldly beauty. No one would know she was the queen of scams. Just looked like a woman men would want to marry and put in a case with the rest of their trophies.

I licked my lips, could never forget the five senses of her. I'd stop the world from spinning if she asked me to. I'd betray God the way Judas Iscariot betrayed His son.

Arizona kept her cellular up to her face. A moment later, mine rang. Area code 809. Good old 809 had been disgraced, used in many Caribbean area codes scams.

I answered, my voice heavy and serious. "I'm inside."

Arizona closed her cellular.

It had been over a year since I'd seen her.

A lot had happened since then.

She reached inside the car and took out a black briefcase, added that to the purse she was carrying. She gripped the briefcase by its handle, turned around, and what I saw her carrying made me sit up straight.

My heart stopped beating. Then my heart restarted, began beating as fast as it could.

Between Arizona's breasts and waist, there was roundness underneath her blouse.

A roundness that told me she was at least in her second trimester.