

One

way of the transgressor

"What 's your goddamn name?"

I stared at the huge man who wore the preacher's collar. He'd been crippled by paid- for violence, dragged downstairs, and tossed onto the marble floor. His arrogant face and body bruised by the brass knuckles that were at my side. He was a big man, much bigger than I. He looked like John Coffey, from *The Green Mile*, in a \$3,000 suit and gators.

"Who are you? Why are you doing this? What's your goddamn name?"

I yawned, exhausted from traveling. I told him, "I don't have a name."

"What do you mean, you don't have a name?"

I had rented a hotel room near Oakland University. Oakland University was in Rochester, Michigan. Not Oakland, California. This Oakland wasn't black. The winters in Michigan were not to be played with. I had on a serious coat, one big enough to shelter my weapons.

From the hotel, I had traveled a few miles away, was creating terror at midnight in the Bloomfield Villas subdivision. On Oak Avenue in Birmingham, Michigan. A sweet \$2 million home. Four- sided brick. Four bedrooms. Three full baths. A half bath on the main floor.

We were in the basement. A finished basement that was laid to the bone. Marble. Golden fixtures. Game room. Full gym. Bar. Bathroom. Jacuzzi. Kid's playroom. Wine room.

I had disabled his alarm system in less than ten seconds. People bought million- dollar homes and never had the phone company move the D-Mark box inside their cribs. If they didn't have backup power, all it took was a pair of dime- store wire cutters to slice the phone lines and shut down the alarm system. I already knew what kind of system had been installed before I crept around back and cut a single wire. I had information on the floor plans for the house, had studied its layout before I compromised his mansion. I had sat in the dark, just another shadow, waiting for the reverend to come home. Church had run longer than I had expected.

He shouted, *"What political organization are you representing?"*

"It's freezing down here. I hate the cold."

"In God's name *who are you?*"

"Is this marble floor heated? Has to be. Marble gets damn cold."

"Who. Are. You?"

His voice echoed, but no one could hear him scream.

Pictures of the reverend and his family were on the walls.

Photos of people who could be his parents and in- laws, political figures and church members, were in every nook and cranny.

High- end art from Europe, sculptures from many parts of Africa, Ralph Lauren paint on every wall, the place was decorated

to the bone. On the back wall was the largest high- def television I had ever seen. Had to be one hundred inches wide. Had to have been imported straight from Japan. Picture so clear it seemed like I should be able to get up and walk right into the screen. It was so clear I should've been able to leave this world and leap into a better life.

There were gold- trimmed stairs. He had spent the congregation's money well.

I tugged at my leather gloves, said, "I'm watching the news. Do you mind?"

My cellular was in my hand. I took a picture of the injured man, sent it to the person who was responsible for this job. The phone on this end was a clone, stolen and untraceable, just like the one on the other end, both to be disposed of when the evening came to its premeditated conclusion. I looked out the window again, stared at the freezing tundra. The weather was in the low twenties, was going to hit zero before long. My breath fogged in front of me.

Reverend raised his pain- filled voice and asked, "How much are they paying you?"

I looked at him.

"I'll pay you one hundred thousand to reverse this shit and . . . and . . ."

"Do unto others."

He growled, "An eye for an eye."

"In the name of the Lord."

"I'm offering you one hundred thousand dollars."

Religion had vacated his tone, replaced by vulgarity and desperation.

I said, "Let me think about it."

I went back to watching *Local 4 News*.

There were accidents on Stephenson Highway, Thirteen Mile Road, and on the connector ramp to the Lodge Freeway. Weather was getting so bad that all of the public schools were being closed. New Haven Marquette Elementary, Monnier Elementary, many more.

I said, "I didn't know there was a Beverly Hills, Birmingham, and Berkley in Michigan."

After talking about layoffs at the Big 3 automotive businesses that dominated the Detroit economy, they talked about more layoffs at Lear and Johnson Controls.

I shook my head. "Economy is fucked up here. Didn't know it was that bad."

Then they reported on a rap war. Two rappers had gone at it Tupac and Biggie style. One called himself Sledgehammer. The other called himself the Big Bad Wolf. They both made cuts dissing each other. And fighting each other. Fights between their crews had just broken out at a radio station up in New York. A few people were shot, more than a few had been hurt.

The reverend struggled to breathe. "Are you . . . planning . . . to kill me?"

"Will you please shut up?"

He shouted, "*If this is a robbery, get to robbing and get the hell out of my home.*"

"What part of shut up don't you understand?"

"I have a family." He was crying. "A beautiful wife. A daughter. A little boy."

I forgot about the news and looked at him. His right eye was swollen, the size of a baseball. His left eye wasn't too much smaller.

"There isn't any money here at the house, I swear, but let me ring my wife. She will pay what ever you ask, without question, without reporting the incident. Let me talk to my children. I want you to hear their voices. Hear the love. You have a heart, don't you? You have children?"

He spat on the floor. Blood and saliva. Marked the floor with his DNA.

I looked at my watch.

Reverend sounded like he was in the pulpit, fire and brimstone in his voice, as if he were in charge. "I have two. Two wonderful children. Both attend Christian schools."

Confirmation was due five minutes ago.

Palms sweating. Listening for sirens. That had left me more than nervous.

"Greater Life Academy. A *Christian* school. Children must attend schools that are not afraid to acknowledge Jesus and give praise to the Lord. Do you believe in the Lord? My daughter is six. My son is four. Straight- A students."

"Hallelujah, Reverend. Now shut the fuck up."

He closed his eyes, prayed.

Back to the news. The mayor's recent State of the City address was being talked about, debated, said the mayor was forthright when he said Detroit was in serious trouble, refused to let Motown die on his watch, pundits saying the city was already dead and needed to be funeralized.

"Reverend . . . is that you and a group of protestors standing behind the mayor?"

"Is that what this is about?"

"With the religious power you have, you could get a political stronghold on Detroit."

"Is that what this is about? My announcement that I was considering running for mayor?"

"Wow. Look at that close- up of you as the mayor is speaking. Man, you look pissed off."

"Because we disagree with all the mayor has done. Under his rule, Detroit has been run into the ground. I'd rather live in Ninth Ward of New Orleans than watch my Detroit fall apart."

"Ninth Ward. Cutthroat City. Where you were born."

"I was born . . . in the Mighty 9. Came to Detroit when I was a boy."

"Now you're going up against the mayor of Motown."

"Did he send you to do this?"

"You sure publicly disagreeing with the sitting mayor was the right thing to do?"

"That overrated, pimp- suit- wearing son of a . . . does he have something to do with this?"

"He sort of reminds me of Suge Knight. What ever happened

to Suge?”

“Is the mayor behind this? Is this about the church protesting and demanding the mayor to step down so we can once again make Detroit the great city it once was? Watch us. We will put the motor back in the Motor City. We will be mo’ better than when we were Motown.”

“Running for mayor. Didn’t know you were that famous.”

“I am a man of God. I have been a pillar of the community for three de cades.”

“Big church?”

“Twenty thousand members and growing. My message is broadcast around the world.”

“I don’t know you.”

“They know me from Seattle to South Africa. So you may want to reconsider.”

“Hot damn. You’re famous. International. Maybe I should get your autograph.”

“Please, let me go.”

There were enough pictures of him and politicians to display his lust for power. His photos told me he was a man who had to be in control. Now he had no control.

His joy was in controlling the sheep of this city.

One sheep had stepped away from his flock, refused to bow down to his power.

My eyes wandered the room again. The reverend had a lot. Seeing his wordly possessions reminded me that I’d been robbed of all I owned. Robbed by Thelma. I thought about Thelma. Thought about the last time I saw her. I thought about all she had taken from me. I should’ve put a bullet in her heart and killed my anger.

My eyes went to the pictures of the reverend’s family. Images of his children and his wife all over the place. So much love in the picture between him and his wife. That forever love. Sometimes I wanted that. What I saw in those pictures, I wanted that shit for myself.

I said, “I caught feelings for this woman a long time ago.”

The reverend grunted. “What you say?”

“Was talking, telling you about this girl. Met her at a pool hall in California. I was about an hour outside of Los Angeles, in North Hollywood. The old man they called Big Slim ran this hot spot. A bona fide thieves’ paradise. A simple girl, she was. At least she was back then. Beautiful, exotic girl dressed in Salvation Army clothes. But the part of her I found so beautiful, nobody could see. She didn’t see it herself. I saw beyond her daddy issues, the issues she had with her mother, saw beyond the sibling rivalry she had, saw beyond all of that shit in her life.”

“What’s your problem, son?” Reverend coughed, spat up blood. “Speak your mind.”

“Arizona.”

“It happened in Arizona.”

“No. That’s her name. Arizona.”

“Speak your mind, son.”

“Sure you want to hear this?”

He grunted, struggled to breathe. "Speak your mind."
"She was seeing somebody else. Flimflam man. A high roller. But I put my bid in. She laughed in my face, told me that if I wanted to be with her, I needed a million dollars in the bank."

He released more pain.

I whispered, "A million dollars."

"So that is what motivates you. Your love for a woman."

"My hate for one woman fuels my anger while my love for another fuels my purpose."

"Hate is cancer of the soul. Tell me about the one you hate."

"I don't want to talk about that whore."

"A man should not speak of a woman with such venom."

"No, Reverend. *Whore* is accurate. She's a woman of the night. She's a whore."

"Like Mary Magdalene."

"The one I like, I've been trying to get a million dollars in the bank ever since I met her."

"The one you hate is a whore."

"Yeah."

"The one you love, she hung out in a den of thieves and wrongdoers."

"She's a thief." I nodded. "Runs scams. An artful dodger. Bona fide flimflam woman."

"A thief and a whore. Criminals and the unrighteous. Transgressors. Like you."

"I don't scam or steal. I've been stolen from. But I never steal. Never been a righteous man, not like you. Guess you could say criminals always end up being drawn together."

His pain was getting the best of him. Sweat dripping from his skin like rain.

Then my cellular phone vibrated. It was a text message. I flipped the phone open and finally saw a three- word message.

Funds transferred, proceed. Followed by a smiley face.

I told him, "Time for us to raise up out of here."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Cold as hell outside."

"Can I please get my coat?"

"Afraid not."

"I need to take my Bible. A man of God must always travel with His word near his heart."

"Sure." I took a deep breath, both tired and irritated. "Get your Bible."

He loosened his collar and limped his gigantic frame across the room, went to the wall filled with leatherbound books, and with his injured hands struggled to pull out a worn Bible.

It was a beautiful red Bible with golden letters across the front.

He said, "This was my first Bible. My *first*. It was Father's *first* Bible. He was a minister. He owned it before me. And this Bible, it is to be my son's first Bible. *Hallelujah*, glory to *Gawd*."

He held his Bible to his chest like it was his salvation. Or his bulletproof vest.

Again, in a shaky voice, he said, "Who are you?"

"I don't have a name."

"You have to have a name."

"Why?"

"So people know who to be afraid of." He laughed a pained laugh. "How are people going to know who to be afraid of? You can't be afraid of someone who doesn't have a name."

"I don't need a name."

"What if Jesus didn't have a name? What if Satan didn't have a name? Good or evil, everyone must have a name. We name what we praise, we name what we fear."

The Bible he held, though his hands were wounded; at least two fingers were broken.

He said, "The wrong you're doing . . . stop doing evil while you can. Stop because one day somebody will come for you. One day what you do to other people, that will be done to you."

His righteous words slowed me down, sent a chill through my frame.

I said, "Hopefully you and my employer can work this out for the best."

"Two hundred thousand. I'll get you two hundred thousand in thirty minutes."

"Both of you care about the future of Detroit."

"The mayor. It's that self-righteous, arrogant motherfucker. I knew it."

"Let's go."

"I'll get you three hundred thousand to kill that son of a bitch."

"You have that kinda cash on hand?"

"Not here. At my church. In the safe. No one has access to the safe."

"No one?"

"There is only one person I trust."

"Don't tell me God has the combo to your safe?"

"I mean here on earth. Only one person on earth I trust."

"Who?"

"Do we have a deal?"

I almost smiled. Three hundred thousand would put me much closer to my goal.

I shook my head. "Sorry. I never double-cross my clients."

He asked, "And you're going to kill me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because some people deserve to die."

A rush of fear and desperation bloomed in the reverend's face. He began praying. With those damaged fingers he fumbled with the Bible. Struggled to open the damn thing.

The pain in his hands was too great. But he never stopped praying.

He dropped the Bible and it popped open. God's words had been hollowed out and replaced with a snub-nose .38. That fourinch barrel leapt out, hit the marble floor hard, slid ten inches in my favor. His swollen eyes met mine, panic came out of his body

on the winds of the loudest scream I'd ever heard. I raced for his .38 like I was racing to stop my own death.

He tackled me like he was a Pro Bowler, lifted me up quick and fast, ran with me, knocked over North African sculptures; the sheep became a raging bull as he slammed me into the one- hundred- inch television against the wall. I swung at his head, connected a few times, but it did no damage, not enough to take him down. He slammed me into the wall again and again.

I gritted my teeth, grunted with each blow. One final slam and I screamed.

Pain consumed me like fire and I went limp, almost blacked out.

He was winded, out of shape, and had to let me go.

I went down fast and hard. So did he.

He collapsed and lay there praying and breathing hard. I lay there rolling in pain.

Reverend made it to his feet first, staggered away from me, limped toward the .38.

"Satan will not defeat me. Not in my home. Not in the Lord's house."

He picked the gun up, frantic, grunting, his swollen fingers getting the best of him.

"Son of a bitch. The mayor . . . I'll kill every motherfucking de vil he sends my way."

He wasn't the reverend anymore. He was a pissed- off gangster born in New Orleans.

He grunted and with his aching fingers raised the .38, pointed it at my head.

I was staring at the long barrel of death.

Time slowed down.

By sunrise, the reverend would be a hero. Attacked in his home by an assassin. Then killing the assassin. God was on his side. He'd be a statewide hero by noon. His congregation would be with him on the evening news. CNN would call. Larry King would want to chat with him. *USA Today* would cover this, a picture of the reverend on the cover, followed by a photo of the reverend and his family on page two. He would become the next mayor of Detroit.

All from my death.

There were three explosions.

The first bullet whizzed by my head and hit the wall.

The second bullet would've been in my left eye, had I still been there.

I scampered across the frozen marble, rolled, and yelled out my own fear, came up one knee, crouched, now a smaller target. Sweat in my eyes, pain in my lower back, I had come up facing my enemy, my hand reaching underneath my coat, pulling my .22 from its holster.

I was trapped against the wall, broken television behind me, death in front of me.

It was a .38 against a .22.

The third explosion came from my gun.

I had aimed at his chest, but my pain lowered my gun and my shot was way off, the bullet hitting his right leg. He screamed, staggered, went down on one knee.

He wasn't running. They always ran. He was coming after me. Minister by trade, soldier at heart. He'd become the wounded animal going after his hunter.

His next shot hit the marble floor near my feet. The next hit the shattered television behind me.

If I hadn't beaten him down, if his hands weren't broken, I'd be dead right now.

There were two more explosions. Both came from the .22 I was holding.

One tore into his left arm, that brand- new pain slowing him down.

The second ripped opened a tiny hole in the front of the reverend's head.

There was another explosion, one last echo. The final sound from the battle. His gun fired at the ground, the bullet ricocheting off the marble and shattering glass.

The gun fell from his swollen hand; the reverend slumped into his death. He lay there like a big rag doll, his body in a pool of blood, part of his brain decorating the wall behind him.

I swallowed. Trembled. Looked down at the gun in my hand.

For a moment I was seven years old. There was no joy in killing, not for me. The nauseous feeling that came after I did a job told me there was no joy at all.

I used the camera phone, took a photo, sent that image to the other side of the country.

I was still trembling.

First I was as cold as a Siberian wasteland. Cold and detached, like a whore with her john. It was as if I were watching someone else do horrible things. Then I realized I was drenched, face damp. Sweat glands were pumping hard. Chest rising and falling.

My cellular rang.

Sweat in my eye, I pulled myself together and answered, "Talk to me."

"Is he . . . the reverend . . . did you . . ."

I panted. "You get the picture I sent you?"

"Yes."

I got my breath and firmed my tone. "Then don't ask stupid questions."

Another chill hit me. Like Death was in the room collecting souls, passing through me, its icy fingers grabbing at my insides, knowing it wasn't my time, but warning me nevertheless.

I asked, "Where are you?"

"My suite. Mayflower Hotel. Downtown Seattle."

"Why are you in Seattle?"

"I'm . . . I'm . . . uh . . . T. D. Jakes conference."

"Pull yourself together. You're at a conference. Doing what?"

"Hosting events for the preachers' wives, giving seminars on family values."

"Lots of people have seen you."
"Thousands. Was onstage at the convention center all day."
"Washington State Convention and Trade Center."
Her voice trembled. "Yes."
"Good. You have your alibi."
"My husband . . . the reverend . . . he's due here tomorrow."
"He won't make it."
"So it's . . . it's really . . . it's done."
"Where are your kids?"
"Sleeping. Different part of the suite."
"You're alone."
"I've sequestered myself from the others in anticipation of this moment."
"You sound drunk."
"Had to . . . Yes, I've had a few drinks."
"Sober up. Go take care of your kids. This time tomorrow they'll know they don't have a daddy. Get yourself some rest. And you'll have to face the media and plan a funeral."
"Detroit can bury that cheating bastard in a cardboard box for all I care."
"Either way, you have to tell your kids their daddy is gone."
"He was fucking the babysitter. Cliché, but true. The babysitter was a live-in. That black bitch was living under my roof. I went to Puerto Rico to visit my family. She took me to the airport. Was all up in my face smiling. I was gone for two weeks. Had taken the kids with me, but had forgotten to turn off the hidden camera. It recorded two weeks of . . . of . . . them fornicating."
She sobbed smooth and easy, made anguish sound beautiful. Soft music was playing in the background. Yolanda Adams. Hadn't heard her spiritual ambiance until that moment.
"In my own house. They did it in my house. Disrespected me right under my nose."
I held the phone, staring at their wonderful photos. He was dressed in an expensive suit, like he was the Donald Trump of Christianity. She was his stunning wife. Power and Beauty. Then I looked down at that hollowed Bible, looked at the reverend's smoking gun.
Anger rose up inside me.
I said, "He said there is three hundred thousand in the safe at church."
She paused. "What else did he tell you?"
"That you have the combination."
"I see."
"There's probably more undeclared tithe money sitting around."
"Okay. So there is a little money in the safe. Big deal."
"I want twenty percent of the three hundred thousand."
"What? Twenty percent of . . . you've already been paid."
"The loaded gun tucked inside the red Bible, you failed to get me that information."
She didn't say anything. Her breathing betrayed her true knowledge.

I said, "Think of it as a sixty- thousand- dollar penalty. Or think of it as sixty thousand reasons for me to not catch a redeye to Seattle. Think what you want. Just wire it to me."

"If I refuse to wire it to you?"

I paused, then whispered, "Marriott."

That one word halted her.

I said, "You're not staying at the Mayflower. You're at the Marriott Waterfront."

That deflated her arrogance.

I said, "Who do you think sent that basket of fruit to the presidential suite?"

She made a sound that radiated her fear.

"Send my money. Or I will find you, Mrs. Reverend."

I closed the phone, stepped over the reverend, went inside a small room hidden off to the side, one that housed the central vacuum system. It also housed systems for DSL, the phone lines, the DVR, the system for the home surveillance. I took the brains of the system, took the recording of me walking up to this property, and got ready to head out into the freezing night air.

Again I trembled, battled another wave of nausea, then pulled it together.

If I had listened closer, I might've heard the sound of a terrified vixen making calls, then the sound of \$60,000 being transferred to a numbered account in a faraway land.

I opened all the windows. The frigid air would throw off his time of death.

At the basement door, breath fogging out of my mouth, I wrapped my scarf around my neck, pulled my beanie down over my head, and prepared to ride through an area that reminded me

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of South Park and the Dilworth District; big- money areas in North Carolina that had plantation homes situated at least a quarter mile from the streets. North Carolina. Where I was born.

I looked back.

Over the years I'd learned that the most common reason for murder for hire was in relation to the dissolution of an intimate relationship. Especially when a lot of money was involved. If he had three hundred thousand in a safe, I'd love to see his bank account. Now Mrs. Reverend would be doing the breaststroke in a

pool filled with Benjamins.

The red Bible rested at her deceased husband's side. My eyes went to the cover.

In golden letters, a name stared up me.

Through my pain I whispered, "Gideon."

I killed the lights, limped across the garden, each uneven step crunching frozen grass.

The reverend was right. Every man needed a name.

People needed to know who to praise.

Or who to fear.

Gideon.

My name would be Gideon.