

## CHAPTER 1

The custodian at St. Mark's had just scraped three inches of snow off the sidewalks when the man with the cane appeared. The sun was up, but the winds were howling; the temperature was stuck at the freezing mark. The man wore only a pair of thin dungarees, a summer shirt, well-worn hiking boots, and a light Windbreaker that stood little chance against the chill. But he did not appear to be uncomfortable, nor was he in a hurry. He was on foot, walking with a limp and a slight tilt to his left, the side aided by the cane. He shuffled along the sidewalk near the chapel and stopped at a side door with the word "Office" painted in dark red. He did not knock and the door was not locked. He stepped inside just as another gust of wind hit him in the back.

The room was a reception area with the cluttered, dusty look one would expect to find in an old church. In the center was a desk with a nameplate that announced the presence of Charlotte Junger, who sat not far behind her name. She said with a smile, "Good morning."

"Good morning," the man said. A pause. "It's very cold out there."

“It is indeed,” she said as she quickly sized him up. The obvious problem was that he had no coat and nothing on his hands or head.

“I assume you’re Ms. Junger,” he said, staring at her name.

“No, Ms. Junger is out today. The flu. I’m Dana Schroeder, the minister’s wife, just filling in. What can we do for you?”

There was one empty chair and the man looked hopefully at it. “May I?”

“Of course,” she said. He carefully sat down, as if all movements needed forethought.

“Is the minister in?” he asked as he looked at a large, closed door off to the left.

“Yes, but he’s in a meeting. What can we do for you?” She was petite, with a nice chest, tight sweater. He couldn’t see anything below the waist, under the desk. He had always preferred the smaller ones. Cute face, big blue eyes, high cheekbones, a wholesome pretty girl, the perfect little minister’s wife.

It had been so long since he’d touched a woman.

“I need to see Reverend Schroeder,” he said as he folded his hands together prayerfully. “I was in church yesterday, listened to his sermon, and, well, I need some guidance.”

“He’s very busy today,” she said with a smile. Really nice teeth.

“I’m in a rather urgent situation,” he said.

Dana had been married to Keith Schroeder long enough to know that no one had ever been sent away from his office, appointment or not. Besides, it was a frigid Monday morning and Keith wasn’t really that busy. A few phone calls, one consultation with a young couple in the process of retreating from a wedding, under way at that very moment, then the usual visits to the hospitals. She fussed around the desk, found the simple questionnaire she was looking for, and said, “Okay, I’ll take some basic information and we’ll see what can be done.” Her pen was ready.

“Thank you,” he said, bowing slightly.

“Name?”

“Travis Boyette.” He instinctively spelled his last name for her. “Date of birth, October 10, 1963. Place, Joplin, Missouri. Age, forty-four. Single, divorced, no children. No address. No place of employment. No prospects.”

Dana absorbed this as her pen frantically searched for the proper blanks to be filled. His response created far more questions than her little form was designed to accommodate. “Okay, about the address,” she said, still writing. “Where are you staying these days?”

“These days I’m the property of the Kansas Department of Corrections. I’m assigned to a halfway house on Seventeenth Street, a few blocks from here. I’m in the process of being released, ‘re-entry,’ as they like to call it. A few months in the halfway house here in Topeka, then I’m a free man with nothing to look forward to but parole for the rest of my life.”

The pen stopped moving, but Dana stared at it anyway. Her interest in the inquiry had suddenly lost steam. She was hesitant to ask anything more. However, since she had started the interrogation, she felt compelled to press on. What else were they supposed to do while they waited on the minister?

“Would you like some coffee?” she asked, certain that the question was harmless.

There was a pause, much too long, as if he couldn’t decide. “Yes, thanks. Just black with a little sugar.”

Dana scurried from the room and went to find coffee. He watched her leave, watched everything about her, noticed the nice round backside under the everyday slacks, the slender legs, the athletic shoulders, even the ponytail. Five feet three, maybe four, 110 pounds max.

She took her time, and when she returned Travis Boyette was right where she’d left him, still sitting monklike, the fingertips of his right hand gently tapping those of his left, his black wooden cane across his thighs, his eyes gazing forlornly at nothing on the far wall. His head was completely shaved, small, and perfectly round and shiny, and as she handed him the cup, she pondered the frivolous question of whether

he'd gone bald at an early age or simply preferred the skinned look. There was a sinister tattoo creeping up the left side of his neck.

He took the coffee and thanked her for it. She resumed her position with the desk between them.

"Are you Lutheran?" she asked, again with the pen.

"I doubt it. I'm nothing really. Never saw the need for church."

"But you were here yesterday. Why?"

Boyette held the cup with both hands at his chin, like a mouse nibbling on a morsel. If a simple question about coffee took a full ten seconds, then one about church attendance might require an hour. He sipped, licked his lips. "How long do you think it'll be before I can see the reverend?" he finally asked.

Not soon enough, Dana thought, anxious now to pass this one along to her husband. She glanced at a clock on the wall and said, "Any minute now."

"Would it be possible just to sit here in silence as we wait?" he asked, with complete politeness.

Dana absorbed the stiff-arm and quickly decided that silence wasn't a bad idea. Then her curiosity returned. "Sure, but one last question." She was looking at the questionnaire as if it required one last question. "How long were you in prison?" she asked.

"Half my life," Boyette said with no hesitation, as if he fielded that one five times a day.

Dana scribbled something, and then the desktop keyboard caught her attention. She pecked away with a flourish as if suddenly facing a deadline. Her e-mail to Keith read: "There's a convicted felon out here who says he must see you. Not leaving until. Seems nice enough. Having coffee. Let's wrap things up back there."

Five minutes later the pastor's door opened and a young woman escaped through it. She was wiping her eyes. She was followed by her ex-fiancé, who managed both a frown and a smile at the same time. Neither spoke to Dana. Neither noticed Travis Boyette. They disappeared.

When the door slammed shut, Dana said to Boyette, “Just a minute.” She hustled into her husband’s office for a quick briefing.

---

The Reverend Keith Schroeder was thirty-five years old, happily married to Dana for ten years now, the father of three boys, all born separately within the span of twenty months. He’d been the senior pastor at St. Mark’s for two years; before that, at a church in Kansas City. His father was a retired Lutheran minister, and Keith had never dreamed of being anything else. He was raised in a small town near St. Louis, educated in schools not far from there, and, except for a class trip to New York and a honeymoon in Florida, had never left the Midwest. He was generally admired by his congregation, though there had been issues. The biggest row occurred when he opened up the church’s basement to shelter some homeless folks during a blizzard the previous winter. After the snow melted, some of the homeless were reluctant to leave. The city issued a citation for unauthorized use, and there was a slightly embarrassing story in the newspaper.

The topic of his sermon the day before had been forgiveness—God’s infinite and overwhelming power to forgive our sins, regardless of how heinous they might be. Travis Boyette’s sins were atrocious, unbelievable, horrific. His crimes against humanity would surely condemn him to eternal suffering and death. At this point in his miserable life, Travis was convinced he could never be forgiven. But he was curious.

“We’ve had several men from the halfway house,” Keith was saying. “I’ve even held services there.” They were in a corner of his office, away from the desk, two new friends having a chat in saggy canvas chairs. Nearby, fake logs burned in a fake fireplace.

“Not a bad place,” Boyette said. “Sure beats prison.” He was a frail man, with the pale skin of one confined to unlit places. His bony knees were touching, and the black cane rested across them.

“And where was prison?” Keith held a mug of steaming tea.

“Here and there. Last six years at Lansing.”

“And you were convicted of what?” he asked, anxious to know about the crimes so he would know much more about the man. Violence? Drugs? Probably. On the other hand, maybe Travis here was an embezzler or a tax cheat. He certainly didn’t seem to be the type to hurt anyone.

“Lot of bad stuff, Pastor. I can’t remember it all.” He preferred to avoid eye contact. The rug below them kept his attention. Keith sipped his tea, watched the man carefully, and then noticed the tic. Every few seconds, his entire head dipped slightly to his left. It was a quick nod, followed by a more radical corrective jerk back into position.

After a period of absolute quiet, Keith said, “What would you like to talk about, Travis?”

“I have a brain tumor, Pastor. Malignant, deadly, basically untreatable. If I had some money, I could fight it—radiation, chemo, the usual routine—which might give me ten months, maybe a year. But it’s glioblastoma, grade four, and that means I’m a dead man. Half a year, a whole year, it really doesn’t matter. I’ll be gone in a few months.” As if on cue, the tumor said hello. Boyette grimaced and leaned forward and began massaging his temples. His breathing was heavy, labored, and his entire body seemed to ache.

“I’m very sorry,” Keith said, realizing full well how inadequate he sounded.

“Damned headaches,” Boyette said, his eyes still tightly closed. He fought the pain for a few minutes as nothing was said. Keith watched helplessly, biting his tongue to keep from saying something stupid like, “Can I get you some Tylenol?” Then the suffering eased, and Boyette relaxed. “Sorry,” he said.

“When was this diagnosed?” Keith asked.

“I don’t know. A month ago. The headaches started at Lansing, back in the summer. You can imagine the quality of health care there, so I got no help. Once I was released and sent here, they took me to St. Francis Hospital, ran tests, did the scans, found a nice little egg in the middle of my head, right between the ears, too deep for surgery.” He took a deep breath, exhaled, and managed his first smile. There was a

tooth missing on the upper left side and the gap was prominent. Keith suspected the dental care in prison left something to be desired.

“I suppose you’ve seen people like me before,” Boyette said. “People facing death.”

“From time to time. It goes with the territory.”

“And I suppose these folks tend to get real serious about God and heaven and hell and all that stuff?”

“They do indeed. It’s human nature. When faced with our own mortality, we think about the afterlife. What about you, Travis? Do you believe in God?”

“Some days I do, some days I don’t. But even when I do, I’m still pretty skeptical. It’s easy for you to believe in God because you’ve had an easy life. Different story for me.”

“You want to tell me your story?”

“Not really.”

“Then why are you here, Travis?”

The tic. When his head was still again, his eyes looked around the room, then settled on those of the pastor. They stared at each other for a long time, neither blinking. Finally, Boyette said, “Pastor, I’ve done some bad things. Hurt some innocent people. I’m not sure I want to take all of it to my grave.”

Now we’re getting somewhere, Keith thought. The burden of unconfessed sin. The shame of buried guilt. “It would be helpful if you told me about these bad things. Confession is the best place to start.”

“And this is confidential?”

“For the most part, yes, but there are exceptions.”

“What exceptions?”

“If you confide in me and I believe you’re a danger to yourself or to someone else, then the confidentiality is waived. I can take reasonable steps to protect you or the other person. In other words, I can go get help.”

“Sounds complicated.”

“Not really.”

“Look, Pastor, I’ve done some terrible things, but this one has nagged at me for many years now. I gotta talk to someone, and I got no place

else to go. If I told you about a terrible crime that I committed years ago, you can't tell anyone?"

---

Dana went straight to the Web site for the Kansas Department of Corrections and within seconds plunged into the wretched life of Travis Dale Boyette. Sentenced in 2001 to ten years for attempted sexual assault. Current status: incarcerated.

"Current status is in my husband's office," she mumbled as she continued hitting keys.

Sentenced in 1991 to twelve years for aggravated sexual battery in Oklahoma. Paroled in 1998.

Sentenced in 1987 to eight years for attempted sexual battery in Missouri. Paroled in 1990.

Sentenced in 1979 to twenty years for aggravated sexual battery in Arkansas. Paroled in 1985.

Boyette was a registered sex offender in Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma.

"A monster," she said to herself. His file photo was that of a much heavier and much younger man with dark, thinning hair. She quickly summarized his record and sent an e-mail to Keith's desktop. She wasn't worried about her husband's safety, but she wanted this creep out of the building.

---

After half an hour of strained conversation and little progress, Keith was beginning to tire of the meeting. Boyette showed no interest in God, and since God was Keith's area of expertise, there seemed little for him to do. He wasn't a brain surgeon. He had no jobs to offer.

A message arrived on his computer, its appearance made known by the distant sound of an old-fashioned doorbell. Two chimes meant anyone might be checking in. But three chimes signaled a message from the front desk. He pretended to ignore it.

"What's with the cane?" he asked pleasantly.



“Prison’s a rough place,” Boyette said. “Got in one fight too many. A head injury. Probably led to the tumor.” He thought that was funny and laughed at his own humor.

Keith obliged with a chuckle of his own, then stood, walked to his desk, and said, “Well, let me give you one of my cards. Feel free to call anytime. You’re always welcome here, Travis.” He picked up a card and glanced at his monitor. Four, count ’em, four convictions, all related to sexual assault. He walked back to the chair, handed Travis a card, and sat down.

“Prison’s especially rough for rapists, isn’t it, Travis?” Keith said.

You move to a new town; you’re required to hustle down to the police station or the courthouse and register as a sex offender. After twenty years of this, you just assume that everybody knows. Everybody’s watching. Boyette did not seem surprised. “Very rough,” he agreed. “I can’t remember the times I’ve been attacked.”

“Travis, look, I’m not keen on discussing this subject. I have some appointments. If you’d like to visit again, fine, just call ahead. And I welcome you back to our services this Sunday.” Keith wasn’t sure he meant that, but he sounded sincere.

From a pocket of his Windbreaker, Boyette removed a folded sheet of paper. “You ever hear of the case of Donté Drumm?” he asked as he handed the paper to Keith.

“No.”

“Black kid, small town in East Texas, convicted of murder in 1999. Said he killed a high school cheerleader, white girl, body’s never been found.”

Keith unfolded the sheet of paper. It was a copy of a brief article in the Topeka newspaper, dated Sunday, the day before. Keith read it quickly and looked at the mug shot of Donté Drumm. There was nothing remarkable about the story, just another routine execution in Texas involving another defendant claiming to be innocent. “The execution is set for this Thursday,” Keith said, looking up.

“I’ll tell you something, Pastor. They got the wrong guy. That kid had nothing to do with her murder.”

“And how do you know this?”

“There’s no evidence. Not one piece of evidence. The cops decided he did it, beat a confession out of him, and now they’re going to kill him. It’s wrong, Pastor. So wrong.”

“How do you know so much?”

Boyette leaned in closer, as if he might whisper something he’d never uttered before. Keith’s pulse was increasing by the second. No words came, though. Another long pause as the two men stared at each other.

“It says the body was never found,” Keith said. Make him talk.

“Right. They concocted this wild tale about the boy grabbing the girl, raping her, choking her, and then throwing her body off a bridge into the Red River. Total fabrication.”

“So you know where the body is?”

Boyette sat straight up and crossed his arms over his chest. He began to nod. The tic. Then another tic. They happened quicker when he was under pressure.

“Did you kill her, Travis?” Keith asked, stunned by his own question. Not five minutes earlier, he was making a mental list of all the church members he needed to visit in the hospitals. He was thinking of ways to ease Travis out of the building. Now they were dancing around a murder and a hidden body.

“I don’t know what to do,” Boyette said as another wave of pain hit hard. He bent over as if to throw up and then began pressing both palms against his head. “I’m dying, okay? I’ll be dead in a few months. Why should that kid have to die too? He didn’t do anything.” His eyes were wet, his face contorted.

Keith watched him as he trembled. He handed him a Kleenex and watched as Travis wiped his face. “The tumor is growing,” he said. “Each day it puts more pressure on the skull.”

“Do you have medications?”

“Some. They don’t work. I need to go.”

“I don’t think we’re finished.”

“Yes we are.”

“Where’s the body, Travis?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Yes I do. Maybe we can stop the execution.”

Boyette laughed. “Oh, really? Fat chance in Texas.” He slowly stood and tapped his cane on the rug. “Thank you, Pastor.”

Keith did not stand. Instead, he watched Boyette shuffle quickly out of his office.

Dana was staring at the door, refusing a smile. She managed a weak “Good-bye” after he said “Thanks.” Then he was gone, back on the street without a coat and gloves, and she really didn’t care.

Her husband hadn’t moved. He was still slouched in his chair, dazed, staring blankly at a wall and holding the copy of the newspaper article. “You all right?” she asked. Keith handed her the article and she read it.

“I’m not connecting the dots here,” she said when she finished.

“Travis Boyette knows where the body is buried. He knows because he killed her.”

“Did he admit he killed her?”

“Almost. He says he has an inoperable brain tumor and will be dead in a few months. He says Donté Drumm had nothing to do with the murder. He strongly implied that he knows where the body is.”

Dana fell onto the sofa and sank amid the pillows and throws. “And you believe him?”

“He’s a career criminal, Dana, a con man. He’d rather lie than tell the truth. You can’t believe a word he says.”

“Do you believe him?”

“I think so.”

“How can you believe him? Why?”

“He’s suffering, Dana. And not just from the tumor. He knows something about the murder, and the body. He knows a lot, and he’s genuinely disturbed by the fact that an innocent man is facing an execution.”

For a man who spent much of his time listening to the delicate problems of others, and offering advice and counsel that they relied on, Keith had become a wise and astute observer. And he was seldom wrong. Dana was much quicker on the draw, much more likely to criticize and

judge and be wrong about it. “So what are you thinking, Pastor?” she asked.

“Let’s take the next hour and do nothing but research. Let’s verify a few things: Is he really on parole? If so, who is his parole officer? Is he being treated at St. Francis? Does he have a brain tumor? If so, is it terminal?”

“It will be impossible to get his medical records without his consent.”

“Sure, but let’s see how much we can verify. Call Dr. Herzlich—was he in church yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so. Call him and fish around. He should be making rounds this morning at St. Francis. Call the parole board and see how far you can dig.”

“And what might you be doing while I’m burning up the phones?”

“I’ll go online, see what I can find about the murder, the trial, the defendant, everything that happened down there.”

They both stood, in a hurry now. Dana said, “And what if it’s all true, Keith? What if we convince ourselves that this creep is telling the truth?”

“Then we have to do something.”

“Such as?”

“I have no earthly idea.”