

THE KILLING PLEDGE



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SURGE
Cayéle

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THE OFFER

The problem with being a killer when you are only fourteen is mobility. It's hard to cause massive amounts of mayhem and expect to slip off unnoticed when all you have is a yellow Huffy bicycle that was donated to you by the local Baptist Church. Mike Hays had come to that conclusion long before he had stolen the gun, but it was on the night that he lay there alone in his bedroom listening to his mother sobbing through the thin trailer's wall that it suddenly occurred to him—why getaway at all?

When your future looked about as bright as a black hole at midnight, why not just leave this world with a bang and take as many of the assholes with you as you could? His mother would have probably agreed with him if she hadn't ended up passing out with one hand resting in an overflowing ashtray. Yes, about as bright as a black hole at midnight, or as dark as the purplish blotch that

was now spreading across his bicep. A gift from said mother and the result of her own black hole. For a moment Mike considered adding her to his list. It would be doing her a favor, not to mention the state of Oklahoma. He lay there that night with drying tears glistening on his face, listening as his mother's anguished moans eventually tapered off, only to be replaced by the wet irregular snores of her alcoholic coma. His world had crumbled and Mike was ready to admit defeat, but he wouldn't go alone.

There had been so many who had helped whittle him down into the crawling freak that he had become. Their laughter constricting him until all that was left was a dried-up husk, withered and ruined. Yes, a freak he might be, but a freak with a list.

Karen Reynolds, with her chocolate brown eyes and perky tits, who had laughed in his face when Mike was forced to ask if he could join her study group would be a good start, and he might as well take out Mr. Riley the history teacher while he was at it, for putting him into that position to begin with. Then there was Kyle Thomas, of course, the athletic prick who made it his mission to keep those who were fighting for air as submerged as possible. He would definitely be next. There were so many that had it coming, so many who loved to leave their little scars. Well, scars could be contagious, and Mike had them in aces.

Now at 7:30 in the morning on that mid-November Monday, it became very clear that even the Huffy would have to be benched. The problem wasn't the cold. Mike would never let something like that get in the way of tallying up the victims. No, the problem was the half-inch sheet of ice that paved the ground of the entire southern half of Oklahoma, which meant that school was closed. The power was out for most of the town, although the lights still managed to burn in the Hays family single wide. Amazingly, the

motionless convoy of manufactured homes that made up the inner Newcastle Trailer Community all seemed to have survived the outage.

Mike carefully stepped out onto the front porch, his left foot sliding forward. The handrail felt like a frozen cactus as he struck out to stop his fall, causing a stinging pain that nipped the tips of his fingers. A gray sky sagged, discoloring the trees that surrounded the community with an ominous haze of decay. Mike pulled out his insulated gloves from his dirty blue Old Navy coat. For a second he thought about not going out. It was freezing after all, and with this ice, he was almost guaranteed to fall down at least once.

But that is not what killers do. Killers don't go home just because of a little cold and equipment still needs to be checked. Andy's stood just a stone's throw away. The emerald light of the \$2.99 A Gallon sign flashed with mechanized enthusiasm, which meant that the convenience store was open. No surprise there since Melanie Chambers was the morning girl. She lived three trailers down from Mike and it always fell on her to open the store during ice storms, floods or hungover no-shows. As a single mother of two boys and a figure that had pretty much gained a pound for each day that her husband had been gone (135 to be exact) she was unknowingly locked into the best days of her short life.

With the caution of an Olympic skier approaching an in-run, Mike slid his way slowly down the four steps until both feet stood on the frozen ground. Slowly, he made his way under the drooping power lines weighed down by cold, translucent daggers like some sort of trap from Indiana Jones. The north wind had a clear shot at him and his face became suddenly stiff. He would stop at the store and get an energy drink and warm up, then continue on

another sixty yards or so past the liquor store to Little Creek Park and check on the stolen gun that he had hidden.

It lay wrapped in an old newspaper in the rotted trunk of an oak tree just on the other side of the broken swing set. Every good killer planned in advance, and Mike was no different.

He had five-fingered the fully loaded Glock from a Lexus that belonged to one of Lorraine Newman's late-night visitors a couple of weeks back. Lorraine worked at a strip club on the south side of Oklahoma City and the rumor was that she didn't stop working once she arrived home. Mike had heard plenty about what her overtime job consisted of, and he liked to keep tabs on her steady supply of late-night guests as they arrived in their shiny new Mercedes and BMWs. You never knew what would roll into the lot on those late weekend nights and if you kept your eyes peeled, you might end up with some really interesting stuff.

A little bell rang as he opened the door. Melanie stood behind the counter with her blond hair horse tailed in the back reading a yellow flyer. She put the paper down and gave Mike a quizzical look, "What are you doing out in this Mikey?"

Mike hated being called that but managed to remain professional.

"Just grabbing a drink," he said. "I want to watch the game." That was always the safest answer. It provided both a deter and detour of further prying questions.

"They might make it to the finals this year," said Melanie. "That Carter is a great player." Yeah, he probably was, but the dreamy look in her sea-green eyes told Mike that it wasn't just his ability to sink the three that impressed Melanie. Standing at the cooler, Mike opened the door and pulled out a super-sized can of Monster.

“You should really be careful with those,” said Melanie. “They’re not good for you.”

Is that what happened to you? he wanted to say, but again, he was able to remain professional. Mike gave her three dollars and put the two pennies in change into his pocket.

“How’s your mom doing?” said Melanie. “I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“She’s fine,” said Mike, and by fine he meant still sleeping off the twelve-pack of Keystone from the night before. “She’s been trying to find a job.”

“Yeah? Well, it’s tough out there right now,” Melanie said, clutching the yellow insert close to her breast. “It’ll work out.”

Mike made for the door when a flyer taped to the storefront window suddenly caught his eye.

COMING SOON

THE SECOND-HAND GUN STORE

He had seen these flyers posted on many of the shops throughout the town. None of them said what day it was opening or even where it was located, but Mike was pretty sure he knew.

“Are you going to check that out?” Melanie said.

“I might,” said Mike. “Do you think it’s going to be on Main Street?” He had seen work being done on the empty building next to Bill’s Pizzeria. It used to be a tire store owned by John Garner until Wal-Mart moved into the Tri-City crossroads, shutting him and about twenty other businesses from Newcastle down.

“That’s what I heard,” said Melanie.

“Is there a copy I can have?” said Mike.

Melanie reached under the counter and pulled out an extra flyer.

“Here,” she replied. “You should probably head back home, it’s supposed to start snowing soon.”

“I will,” said Mike, folding the paper and sticking it into his coat pocket. “I’ll see you later.”

Mike opened the door and felt the arctic blast slap his face like an angry corpse. He flipped up his collar and walked around the building, stopping on the south side out of the wind. He dug into one of his pockets and pulled out a pack of Carnival cigarettes that he had taken from his mother while she was slumped over a half-empty beer. He fumbled around in his other pocket until he found his lighter and cupped it. On the third flick, it flamed long enough for the end of the cancer stick to burn with a weak glow.

The snow came just as he took his first step towards Little Creek Park and Mike again considered going home but reminded himself of his personal creed. The flakes were the size of half-dollars, falling faster and beginning to blanket the ice. Just in front of him stood the open field volleyball court with its two crooked poles suspending a tattered net that rippled like a banner in surrender. Once past it you were officially in the park.

Mike walked under the netted gateway and stopped where the ground started its decline. The park sat in a small valley surrounded by a tree line with ice-covered branches bent over and shining like tinsel Christmas pines. On the south side was an access road that weaved its way up to Main Street. To its east sat the town’s post office, and directly at its center ran an eight-foot-wide creek to which the park owed its name. A narrow wooden bridge with chipped white paint spanned the frozen water, providing a crossover for those who lacked the courage or capability to attempt the leap.

A memory snaked its way painfully up from some dormant safe-house in Mike's mind, triggered by the chilling emptiness that sat like a cemetery for dreams. The thin stubble strewn face of his father appeared; an image of the two of them walking hand in hand towards the swing set. The swings had not been broken then, and Mike was laughing. For a moment he could feel his father grasping him around the waist, lifting him up and placing him on the swing, could almost taste the summer wind as it rushed by his face while his father continued to push him higher and higher until Mike imagined that he was an astronaut heading for the moon. This was before the meth had taken his father away. Before his world had slipped into shadow.

Now the park seemed like a secluded beacon for those hurt enough to feel its call, a wide-open frozen classroom that had taught him the most devastating lesson of life; happiness is an illusion. And it was here that Mike had lived that illusion. It was within this ring of broken branches and bent over pines that his father would take him and spend what little time they would have together. It was here, near the ice-covered creek, that Mike had first noticed how his father would disappear only to return a few minutes later with his jaw twitching in an odd uncontrollable way. And it was here, comforted only by the rusted slides and swings, that Mike had cried after finding out that his father had sat just beyond the northern ridge, a few feet from the merry-go-round, and while holding a picture of Mike and his mother, shot himself.

This park had shared in this dark memory. It had held onto it like a forbidden secret as it quietly watched the rise and fall of his human soul, continuing its silence even as that soul plummeted into a void, possibly lost forever.

The broken swing set sat near the eastern tree line. A rusted A-frame with one leg crumpled like it had been dropped out of the sky. Of the four swings that had been originally attached to the top rail, only two remained intact; their rusted chains whimpered like dying mice as the wind pushed them in an uneven rhythm. The wind-driven snow was falling much faster now, seeming to push Mike across the wooden bridge. The rotted oak stood leafless and dead, like a giant corpse under a freezing white sheet. Mike walked to the other side of the trunk where the hollowed-out cavity held the Glock, stopping briefly to look around like any good killer would do before crouching down.

The old newspaper lay where he had left it, safely dry within the small wooden cave. Mike reached in and pulled the paper out. The gun was gone. Again, he reached in, crawling his hand around until he touched the rough-textured back of the inner wall.

It was gone. How? Some idiot kid must have come by and taken it. Just a freak chance and another notch in Mike's never-ending unlucky streak. A sudden dryness seized his throat as the thought of the police knocking on his door played out like a movie in his mind. His fingerprints would be all over the gun. *The stolen gun.* He could see his mother slurring out profanities, helplessly watching while her baby boy was led handcuffed into the back of a police car. He could see Melanie looking out of her window with her two shitty boys standing at her side chomping at the chance to tell the town.

Think Mike!

He wouldn't panic. Killers don't panic. *You found it.* Yes, that was it. He had found it sitting in the park and being afraid of guns, especially after what had happened to his father, had stuck it in the tree and then forgot about it. That sounded plausible. He

might even look like a hero. They might ask him why he didn't tell someone, to which he would answer *I was going to* and quickly follow up with *But I wanted to watch the game*. Deter and detour. They might not believe him, but what could they do? It's not like he killed anyone and besides, they would have the gun.

But what if they didn't? What if the kid who had found it kept it? What if he shot someone on accident, or himself? *Don't panic*, said Mr. Professional. *It doesn't change the story*. A sudden roll of thunder brought Mike out of his cinematic tragedy. The snow was now being thrown in circles by gusts that were growing more intense. The sky briefly shimmered electric blue from a web of lightning racing across the darkened canopy. From above a snap, like a bone being broken in half, startled Mike to his feet. A large ice-covered branch landed just inches from where he stood trembling.

The gun was gone and the school was closed, so all bets were off, as his dad used to say before the meth took him. Mike turned towards the bridge, holding his hand up to block the swirling flakes and began to stumble back the way he had come. A sudden rush of bone-chilling air hit him, knocking him back two steps. The short distance home now seemed to be a thing of uncertainty; a marathon to which there was no guarantee of a safe finish. A sense of peril entered Mike's mind. A shudder ran through his already trembling body. He tripped over a snow-covered stump, sending waves of pain up his leg. The bridge was near, just a few more feet and he could cross it. With his head down to avoid the stinging flakes, Mike risked a look. The chipped handrail was within arm's reach and Mike jumped for it but his hand slipped off causing him to almost fall into the creek. Again, he tried and was just able to grab it, quickly securing his grip. With both hands now throttling

the rail, Mike pulled himself onto the platform and stopped. At first, what he saw didn't register. It was too impossible to be real. Mike wiped his eyes with his gloves and looked again. A wheelchair sat in the middle of the Little Creek Bridge and on it was a young man, not much older than Mike, wearing nothing more than a tee-shirt and jeans, his dark hair whipping over his smiling face.

Mike pulled himself closer. Suddenly, the kid in the wheelchair raised his arm. Mike took a startled step back and stopped. A barrel of a gun was now pointing directly at his face. A Glock. His Glock.

"Well, Mikey," said a voice behind him. "When your plans go to shit, they really do go to shit."

Mike let out a scream and turned. A tall man dressed in a long overcoat stood just ten feet away. Short black hair was plastered over his pale-skinned skull, sharply parted in the middle. A thin mustache sat over even thinner lips that were curled up into a smile. The wind raging past Mike seemed to avoid this man, his coat hanging motionless as if he were not even there. But he was there. Mike was sure of that, just as he was sure that there was now a pistol being pointed at his back.

"Two," the man said. "That's how many of those assholes you would've gotten before that little hand-gun jammed up. Not too good when compared to recent history. Oh, I don't blame you for wanting to give it a go, but really, a killer with your talent should be better prepared."

Mike snuck a quick peek behind him and saw that the kid still held the Glock.

"Don't worry about him, in fact, he thinks you're doing the right thing, and he would know." Mike turned back to look at the man and found that he now stood just a couple of feet away, towering over him.

“Let me introduce myself,” said the man. “My name is Sam.” A thin pale hand was then extended towards Mike. Mike looked at the long fingers with their swollen knuckles and dark purple lines and felt an urge to be sick.

“Now don’t be rude,” said Sam. “Just because you were born of trailer trash doesn’t mean you have to continue being trailer trash, does it?” Mike instinctively tried to back up but found that both legs refused to move. Sam lowered his hand, his grin widening.

“I see that I’ll have my work cut out for me with you. Let me show you something, Mikey.”

“Don’t call me that,” Mike said, before he could stop himself.

“Now we’re talking, Mikey,” said Sam. “I’m sorry...Mike then. You have ambition and I like ambition. Your problem, however, is knowledge. A common problem for young men such as yourself and easily fixed.”

Mike caught himself nodding in agreement and quickly stopped.

“You’re right to be angry,” continued Sam. “These people and their *Holier Than Thou* attitudes have been putting bees in my bonnet for longer than I care to remember.”

For a moment it seemed as though Sam’s dark eyes suddenly flared orange. Again Mike tried to take a step back, but his legs refused to listen.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Sam. “I’m on your side and believe me, you want me on your side. I have a gift for you. Would you like to see it?”

Mike felt his stomach turn and a sour taste suddenly entered his mouth. A repulsion seeped from this man like squeezed rotten fruit. The best thing for him to do now would be to run and not just run, but run screaming. He knew this. The alarms were ringing at level five inside of his head but Mike hesitated.

“Here,” said Sam. “Let me show you.” His gnarled fingers then opened up the right side of his coat, revealing a long black barrel that was connected to a polished receiver. A break-away strap was draped over Sam’s shoulder. He took hold of the grip that rested next to the chrome trigger guard.

“That’s an AR-15,” gasped Mike.

“That’s right, bump-stock included,” said Sam. “Do you like it?”

“Can I hold it?” said Mike. Sam closed his coat and then quickly opened it again. The gun had disappeared. “It’s good to see a young man who knows his equipment. And yes, you can do more than hold it, you can have it. If you can prove to me that you deserve it.”

Mike could feel the custom made stock pressed tightly to his shoulder, could hear the rapid popping as he squeezed the AR-15s trigger. “What do I have to do?”

“For now, I want you to just be my friend,” said Sam. “Do you think you can do that?” Mike, who was still lost in the elation of automatic fire, slowly nodded his head.

“Good,” said Sam. “Your time is coming Mike, and I have very big plans for you. Can we be friends?” Sam again reached his hand out and this time Mike took it.



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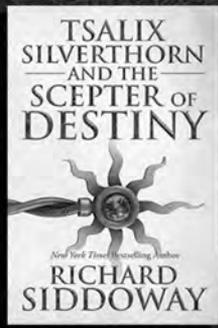
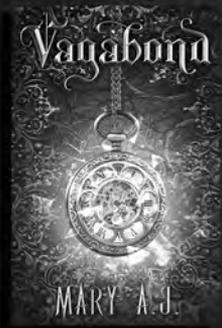


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