

All Who Love and Serve Your City



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Chapter One

Reverend Joshua Gates took a long drag on his cigarette and tucked his pastoral collar in his black shirt pocket. His client was five minutes late.

It was a full day at his primary job as the pastor of Luther Memorial Church in Manhattan's East Village. He had worked hard all morning on a grant proposal for the congregation's food pantry, only to get called away on a pastoral emergency to Lower Manhattan Hospital. An elderly neighbor, one who never attends but faithfully gives, was rushed in due to chest pains. Fortunately, it seemed like a minor heart attack and nothing more, but when tending to an 85-year old, a pastor can't be sure of when they'll have to be there for someone at the end.

After that, Josh went back to his office, only to be greeted by a stack of bills the congregation could barely afford to pay. While rifling through them, he received a phone call from a neighbor about a man who needed housing, but most of the shelters he checked were full and, anyway, the man didn't trust shelters. The man was disappointed to learn that the church did not have housing accommodations, and he took his disappointment out on Josh in the form of verbal abuse. After all this, he rushed home for a quick dinner only to remember that his wife Julia was in between night shifts at Manhattan General's ER and wouldn't be around after they ate. Plus, tonight was the bi-weekly young adult gathering, so he had to lead the discussion at *Red Wolfe* off of St. Mark's Place. But just as he was halfway through dinner, his phone

vibrated, reminding him of a meeting for his other job as a private investigator. He scarfed down the food, gave Julia a peck on the cheek and dashed to his other office.

Where he was still waiting for his client.

Josh's P.I. "office" wasn't actually an office, it was the back room of a used bookstore off of Avenue A, near the corner of 8th street. The owner, Terry, a silver haired anarchist who spoke with a raspy voice, let him use the space for one-on-one meetings. It consisted of nothing more than a small area with a bookcase full of discounted items, with a door leading to the alley. Josh liked it because he could open the door and have a smoke. Smoking helped him focus.

Two years earlier, Josh was desperate to get out of his last pastorate in Los Angeles, so he moved cross-country. He took Luther Memorial in Manhattan, right across the street from Tompkins Square Park off of Avenue B. Although the congregation did have an apartment for the pastor, they could barely afford to pay him more than a half-time salary. He would have to get a second job.

Joshua Gates was fortunate. His school loans were paid off, and he didn't need a car since he lived in downtown Manhattan. He didn't have much personal overhead aside from theology books and cigarettes. Whatever he did could be a simple side job. And while his time in LA left him scarred, it also

exposed him to something he never knew about himself: he could make money from his natural curiosity.

And thus, a career as a low-rent private eye was born.

Joshua wasn't into mystery novels, but he had read some of the classics from Chandler and Mosley and those led him to believe that P.I. life would be more fun and dangerous than it actually was. The bulk of his work was divorce cases, as well as a few people asking him to find runaway loved ones across the city. He solved some, didn't solve others, made a few bucks on the side and life went on. Marrying Julia six months earlier eliminated any pressing need for a second job, but he enjoyed the excuse to traipse around the city and be professionally curious. The rare occasion of uncovering the truth was a rush he craved.

So, despite not needing the money and not finding much excitement in what he did, Josh kept at it. But his client was late. And Joshua Gates hated lateness.

He took another drag on the cigarette and stepped out from the small room to stare at a dark, fierce blue sky that promised rain. The air was pregnant with it, in the way only mid-spring can be. Josh hoped it will hold off until after the young adult gathering—he didn't want to get wet walking home.

As Josh finished his cigarette, stepped on the butt and contemplated leaving, the door opened and in walked his client, Oscar Alvarez. Six feet tall

with grey streaks mixed into raven black hair that sat atop a handsome, masculine face, he was dressed sharply in a business suit that looked out of place in the back of a hole-in-the-wall East Village bookstore. Alvarez approached Josh and offered his hand. The P.I. took it and noted, without surprise, a firm shake. He judged Alvarez to be about 50.

“Reverend Gates?”

“Mr. Alvarez. Please, call me Josh.”

“Tough to do. I’m an old school Catholic.”

“It’s appreciated, but when I’m doing this job, I like to leave my other one at home.”

“Fair enough. I apologize for the lateness—work. I’m sure you know how it is.”

“No worries,” lied Gates. “What can I do for you?”

Alvarez smiled, as if he wasn’t quite sure how to answer the question.

“I have an unusual request for you, Josh.”

“If it’s divorce, I can promise you it’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

“Definitely not divorce. Although why do I always read in books that you guys don’t do divorce cases?”

“You should read fewer books. Divorce is consistent business and pays good money.”

“Probably messes with your morals, right?”

Josh smirked. “As I said, I like to separate my jobs when possible.”

“Right. Of course. But this is not a divorce case. Not by a long shot.”

The P.I. paused, waiting for his client to continue.

“I’m sure you know that I’m a businessman, and that mentality affects everything I do. Not just my work. So, you shouldn’t be surprised that I did some research on you before reaching out. I know you don’t want to talk about your other job, but you’re involved in things in the Lower East Side, right? You know what’s going on in the community?”

“Most of the time, yeah.”

“Then you know about Roberto Alvarez, right?”

“I do.”

“That’s my father.”

Given that Alvarez was a popular name, Josh hadn’t assumed there was a connection. Roberto Alvarez was, at that moment, at Rikers Island, awaiting trial for murdering Tristan Nash, the representative of a developer who wanted to buy the building he’d lived in for over fifty years. The two had gotten into a heated argument in Alvarez’s apartment and it allegedly spilled into the basement of the complex, which is where Nash was eventually killed.

“I can’t imagine you want me to find your father, Mr. Alvarez.”

“No, of course not. I want you to prove he didn’t do it.”

A thickness hit Josh’s stomach, partially from the indigestion of his hurried dinner and partially from nervous confusion.

“That’s not really what I do, sir.”

“I know. But the police are convinced he’s guilty. And they won’t listen to me. Even when two eyewitnesses alibied him, they still arrested him and won’t give him bail.”

“What makes you think there’s a world in which I can do better than the police?”

“You don’t have the need to find him guilty the way they do.”

“That’s not the point, Mr. Alvarez. The police have time, money and resources that I don’t have. Even if I thought your father was innocent, there’s no way I could even begin to prove it. And if I did, there’s no guarantee they’d listen to me.”

“Honest question: do you think my father did it?”

“If I remember correctly, the bullet casings match a gun of the caliber he owned.”

“The Glock 9 is the most purchased handgun in America.”

Josh shrugged his shoulders. “Are we going to debate ballistics? How much longer do you want to continue with this fantasy?”

“How does five thousand dollars sound?”

“It sounds like a lot of money, far more than I’m worth. I’m a bargain basement P.I., Mr. Alvarez. I find cheating husbands and runaways for society parents too embarrassed to call the authorities. I don’t disprove murders. You’ve read too many books.”

“You’re part of LECT, right? The community organizing group that tried to block the sale of the apartments?”

“Yeah, so?”

“How did that make you feel when you guys failed?”

“I wouldn’t say we failed...”

“Come on.”

“No community organizing group ever truly fails, Mr. Alvarez. You go up against the big boys, you’re gonna lose more often than not. It’s a rigged game. We take our wins where we can get them. Now, are you trying to play on my sympathies or is there a point? Because it seems like we’re wasting our time.”

“This is your chance to get back at them for what they took from your community. Those apartments have been there for decades. I was born a block away from there. My first crib was a dresser drawer. When I got some cash and my mom died, I convinced my father to move. It’s his only home. A lot of good people are going to get kicked out, not just my father. They’re framing him so they can move the sale along. I need your help. Those people need your help.”

“You really think proving your father’s innocence is going to block the sale of this thing?”

“I believe in miracles, Father. If I may dare to call you that.”

Josh drew in a deep breath. He needed another cigarette. The first taps of rain hit the roof. “Here’s what I’ll do. I’ll re-interview the witnesses. I’ll ask some other folks a few questions, see if this could’ve been a mistake. Today is Tuesday. My pastoral office days are Tuesday and Wednesday. Obviously, I don’t work Sunday mornings but, the rest of the week, I’m at your disposal. Give me until next Tuesday night. Let’s meet here at 7pm. If I have anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Who else are you going to talk to?”

“You leave that to me. I never promise results and I’m not going to start now. I think you’re wasting your money and, for that much, you could get a better investigator than me. I’m willing to recommend some. This is your last chance.”

Alvarez whipped out a check book and signed one over to Reverend Joshua Gates. The latter took an iPad out of his bag and pulled up a standard contract for Alvarez to sign.

“Don’t call me for updates,” the private investigator said. “If there’s anything that can’t wait or that I need to ask, I’ll let you know. Otherwise, I’ll see you next Tuesday.”

Alvarez smiled once more. Josh imagined that the man could get a lot of things with that smile. It was a winning one.

“Forgive me for referencing your other job again, but I have faith in you, Reverend Gates. God will provide. Luke 8:17: *For there is nothing*

hidden that will not be disclosed and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out in the open.”

“I see you read something other than the Latin missal?”

“Haha. I might be a cafeteria Catholic, but I know a few things.”

Josh said a quick, unreturned goodbye to Terry and made the five-minute walk to the bookstore in what had become a driving rainstorm. He had about ten minutes before people start coming into *Red Wolf* for the meeting, so he decided to get a beer and reflect.

Josh knew it was a fool’s errand to even contemplate doing what he had been asked to do. There was no secret to uncovering a case like this and, even if there was, he wouldn’t know how to find it. He wanted to believe that Roberto Alvarez didn’t shoot that man in anger and that the developer would back off from buying the building and then it would have a snowball effect and end gentrification forever. The reality was, while the gun hadn’t been found, it was likely Alvarez’s and, even if it wasn’t, the nation’s perpetual thirst to incarcerate people needed another number.

But still, Josh’s curiosity was getting the better of him. *What if Alvarez was innocent?* Plus, he had taken the money. He would surprise Julia with it in the morning. Maybe they could go to Europe again this summer.

Josh took a long sip of his beer and tried to organize his next few days. Thursday morning, he would talk to the two witnesses who had alibied

Alvarez. And then to his source in the NYPD. Maybe he could have a conversation with a pastor friend who had worked closely on fighting the building's sale to get a sense of its intricacies. From there, perhaps a call to the state's attorney's office. But what would he say? Those clowns never took private investigators seriously.

After that, God knew. Literally. Josh tried to think of other things he could do in the five days that he had. A lesser man would just run the clock out and keep the check, but Gates was duty-bound to see this through.

The first of his congregation's young adults began to come through the door of the bar. Gates slipped his collar on and greeted them. Luther Memorial had called him in part because they believed he had a special rapport with young adults given that, at 35, he was one himself. He didn't believe this to be true, but he had now served in three churches and each one had a thriving young adult group so apparently, he was doing something right.

Tonight was no different. The usual group attendance was around ten and while Josh thought this would fall off due to the weather, that proved not to be the case. Thirteen showed up—ten regulars and three guests. Every other week, the group got together to talk about a subject that was either faith-based or secular, with a focus on how they experienced—or didn't experience—God regarding said subject. The discussion, along with the drinks, usually flowed well as Josh was a capable moderator and Mary, the Latvian bartender, was a capable hostess. *Red Wolf* was an old school East Village bar. It was nothing

special but was one of the few places with the ability to seat a large group of people without total discomfort. The easygoing atmosphere, combined with Josh's warmth and empathy, helped him to draw a diverse group of people from various backgrounds and beliefs.

The discussion was good tonight—robust and learned. For ninety minutes and two beers, Josh forgot all about the Alvarez family, the developers sinking their clutches in the East Village and the empty bed he was going home to.

After a while, the group thinned out. Joshua contemplated staying for another beer, but two is a strict limit with parishioners present, and he couldn't keep the weight off like he could when he was younger. He said bye to the stragglers who have decided to stay for another round and makes his way out—the rain having finished its business while they were in the bar. Usually loving the walk home, he dreaded it tonight, unable to keep his mind off Oscar Alvarez. Josh had been approached by many clients who attempted to play on his sympathies. *Imagine if she was your daughter? Your husband? Your wife?* Such expressions had little effect on Josh; he only took jobs he could manage, despite the power of the sob story. But this one was different—and not just because of the money. It had a direct impact on the community he served.

Josh unlocked the church and walked upstairs to the apartment. The spacious three-bedroom, two-bathroom place was more than him and Julia

needed, but they loved it just the same. He couldn't imagine what the rent would be on an open market. Josh had lived in three different parsonages and, by far, this was his favorite. It was easy to clean, spacious enough and right in the heart of the city, complete with a congregation that knew better than to bother him at home.

Alexanderplatz, Julia's black cat who somewhat tolerated Josh, rubbed his body in a friendly manner on Josh's legs when he walked in the door. He had hoped to sneak off to the roof for a pre-bed cigarette, but the rain started up again. Instead, he went to one of the bedrooms—which he converted to his own personal office space—lit up and blew smoke out the window, staring at the rain as Faith Evans sang about someone who used to love her, the sound coming through his iPhone speakers. Julia hated when he smoked indoors, but nicotine always won. Josh smoked in college and then quit, more or less until the end of his time in Los Angeles, where the stress encouraged him to resume the bad habit.

Alexanderplatz, named after the Berlin square, crawled into the windowsill to keep Josh company. He rubbed the cat's fluffy head, and it responded with a purr. Faith Evans gave way to Philanthrope's *Moonshine*, a song that matched weather with mood. He contemplated a second cigarette, wanting to stave off having to go to bed alone. By now, he should've been used to Julia's three-nights-a-week work schedule, but he wasn't. There was a

heavy, lingering feeling of loneliness every time her presence left the apartment.

Knowing better than to have a second cigarette, Josh fired up his laptop, looking for articles on Roberto Alvarez. The shooting made a ripple when it happened two months earlier, so most of the big-time city newspapers had some sort of coverage on it. Unfortunately, though, it was nothing he didn't already know, save the commentary of neighbors who universally pegged him as a nice, quiet bachelor who didn't bother anyone. None of them could imagine him killing someone.

He continued his research on the victim. Tristan Nash was a representative of Glennon & Sons Developers, the group that continued their efforts to buy the building after his passing. Everything about him screamed faceless corporate lackey. He got his education from safety schools for the American elite (Bowdoin for his undergrad, Boston for his MBA) and bounced around from one prestigious real estate firm to another, presumably because he possessed the necessary skills to run people out of their homes with dignity. Josh knew he shouldn't think of a murder victim in such harsh tones—it was un-Christian, to say the least. But, he also knew so many of Nash's types and knew Nash had already been replaced with someone of his ilk, someone possessing the drive to make money off the misery of others, but with only half the salesmanship talent of the big boys.

Nash left behind a wife and two kids. Maybe it would do to talk to her? But probably not. He was hired to exonerate the man that allegedly killed her husband. What could he do besides ask her questions that would push her more deeply into an aggrieved state?

Alexanderplatz leapt onto his keyboard, reminding Josh that it was time for his evening brush-and-treats, a job that was Julia's whenever she was home. Reluctantly, Josh ventured to the bedroom, took care of the cat, and climbed into bed.
