

Requital



took another swig from the square bottle. From past experience, I knew that a little Jack in the morning would fight off the shakes. I had to be rock, rock steady. I had a job to do.

Eyeing the clock on my battered Dodge pick-up, I downed the better part of the brown elixir, flinching at the burning in my gut. I flicked the clock face and cursed when the second hand stopped its jerky loop around the numbers. Had it stopped before? As near as I could figure it, it was 11-0-5.

A killer-for-hire needed a better getaway car. Not a rotted, rusted one that had I had to jump start to make its daily trip to Happy Indian Package Store. The fifty big ones would come in real handy—that is, if I could get the job done.

Propped up by Jack, I was eager to get started. I popped a handful of Certs in my mouth, hoping that they were strong enough to hide his smell. In the rearview mirror, I slicked down my hair—what was left of it—and straightened my tie. I hated ties, especially borrowed ones. When I was with The Bureau that was what I hated the most. Not the discipline. Not the bureaucracy. Not the lousy pay. I had hated J. Edgar's ironclad rule that all his tin soldiers had to wear ties.

From the back of the pick-up, I grabbed the tricks of my trade: a seedy briefcase purchased for a couple of bucks at the Salvation Army; a clipboard stocked with cheap, phony invoices; and a handsome, black Bible, leather-tooled and gold-engraved.

The Good Book, as my mother had always called it, was my most expensive prop. I had never bought a Bible before. I had no idea that Bibles were so expensive, particularly the kind that I needed for this job. The price had been downright sinful. I had hated buying it since I would never have any use for it. Every job required investment capital, however, so I shouldn't complain. Then again, it's not as if I could use the expense as a tax deduction.

Walking by the well-tended garden, I searched the perimeter, ensuring that no one was about. I retained some of my skills from my days of glory before the burn-out, before The Bureau screwed me over, before Jack and I became best friends.

The residence of Mrs. Emmalyne Swanson of Tulsa, Oklahoma smelled of old world money from the beveled windows to the cherry mahogany doors. Digging hard for the courage, I rang the bell.

I checked my appearance, doubting that my rumpled, black suit would pass muster. The pants were shiny in the places where Trixy had ironed them and blotched in the places where she had spilled her paper cup. I brushed at a blotch and smelled stale gin. *Damn!*

There was no time for more preparation. The curtain had risen on this job. My target was opening the door: a wintry lady draped in a flowered shawl.

“May I help you, young man?”

This was it! Fifty thousand dollars, payable by grandson, Waxmore T. F. Swanson, was riding on my performance. I opened my mouth to speak. My voice was husky, whiskey-coated. I coughed and tried again.

“Good morning, ma’am, and what a lovely morning the good Lord has graced us with. I’m sorry to trouble you, but I’m from the Trixstar Bible Company and I—”

“Bible company. Oh, come in, come in.”

“Thank you.” I smiled showing my teeth. Poor, old thing. I would hate killing her, but I needed the money.

“I was making a cup of tea. You must join me.”

“Well.” I hesitated, politeness personified. “If I wouldn’t be putting you to too much trouble. A cup would be mighty-fine.”

“No trouble at all.”

She led me to a dimly lit parlor. In the doorway, I was met by a low growl. At my feet, having arrived by soft-paw, was the biggest, ugliest, meanest-looking junkyard dog that I had ever seen. *Holy shit!* I stepped back, catching the Bible before it hit the floor.

“Oh! Don’t mind Shadow. He wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

She busied herself with raising the shades. The room was bright with sudden sunlight. It was blinding. I raised my hand, shielding my eyes. Shadow snarled. I got a good look at his sharp, well-defined teeth.

“Don’t be bashful, young man. Oh dear. I don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Merk Smith and I’m very pleased—”

“So common, these days, to use nicknames.” She raised her snowy brows with delicate inquiry.

“Of course, I was christened ‘Murgatroyd’—after my father,” I tacked on, lying. But it sounded good, legitimizing. *What am I gonna do about the freaking dog?*

“Murgatroyd. Murgatroyd. I knew a Murgatroyd once. Dear me. When was that?” She tapped her finger against her cheek. “Let me think. I can’t recall. So terrible when one grows old. The mind, it fails.”

“But the good Lord has—”

She raised one imperative finger.

“Whistle.”

“What?”

“The tea. Take a seat on the settee, Mr. Smith. I’ll be back in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.”

She watched me until I complied. My seat on the settee was hot and uncomfortable and threw me in the direct path of the sunlight. I shifted, uneasily, wanting to rise. But, for some strange reason, I couldn’t do so when she gave me a fixed look.

I was left alone with Shadow. I judged, by the size of the gnawed bone tucked under his haunch that he was sleeping off a large meal. I was apparently forgotten. It was 11-21. It was time. I rose.

My scuffed brown shoes, hastily covered with black polish, creaked.

Shadow stiffened.

His tongue doled out, pink and long.

He licked his chops.

I sat down with prudent prescience. The silence deepened, broken only by the ticking of the grandfather clock. It chimed the half-hour. I grew impatient. The shakes were back, and time was a-wasting. I needed to get the job done. I needed a drink. The old lady had to be dead before noon, before she could change her will.

I choked back a curse when she entered, carrying a large tray. It was loaded with silver. Remembering my role, I moved to assist her. Shadow barked his displeasure.

“Hush, Shadow! Mr. Smith is playing the gentleman.”

Like a southern belle, she poured the tea. Passing me a porcelain cup, she said, “Just don’t sit there, dear. Tell me why you’re here.”

“Have you had the dog long?”

“Dear me, no. Shadow and I are newfound friends. Even my grandson doesn’t know about him.”

She watched me, her snowy brows twitching. I resisted the urge to squirm.

“Perhaps, perhaps, he would like a run outside.”

She laughed, a cultured laugh of honey and pearls.

“Of course, not. Shadow never leaves my side.”

“But on a nice day like this. I’d gladly take him—”

“Drink your tea before it grows cold.”

I sipped, the sound overloud in the too quiet room. *Goddamn! The only way I could tolerate another swallow of this witches’ brew was with a large splash of Jack.*

“So you’re with a Bible company,” she said.

“The Trixstar Bible Company of Ponca City. We produce the—”

“Publish.”

“Huh?”

“Publish. Not produce.”

“Right, publish.”

“Just like my grandson. He had such a problem with grammar. I tutored him, but he still failed.” She raised her eyes, gently shaking her head. “So sad. The trouble that boy caused his parents. Always in trouble with the law... and the expense....”

“Really.”

“Yes-in-deed-dy. Quite the black sheep, even the best families have them....”

She rambled on, in the way of elderly folks who want to tell you about their grandchildren.

I feigned interest. I knew all about the rodent-faced Waxmore. All that I wanted to know. His fee had doubled. He had lied. This job wasn’t going to be a piece of cake—not with that mongrel nipping at my toes.

Still, I could, would, pull it off. The heavy, gold candlestick was close. *A blow to the old woman's head.*

“Ah-hem.” She cleared her throat with purpose.

“Sorry.” *But could I get the dog too? I fingered my snub-nosed .38, reluctant to up the ante. Unless I had to. Better to make it look like a botched robbery.*

“Pay attention, dear. You’ll never make anything of yourself unless you do.”

“Pardon.”

I heard myself apologizing. I was beginning to commiserate with grandson Waxmore. Grandma was a bit of a pisser. I picked up the thread of my cover story.

“I’m with the—”

“The Trixstar Bible Company of Ponca City,” she interrupted, sing-song. “I heard. Amazing. I thought I knew all the Bible companies in Oklahoma.”

“We’ve a small, select distribution.”

“Show me.” She held out an imperial hand. It was white, puffy, looking soft to the touch.

“We at Trixstar are very proud to *publish* the finest Bible made. Think how it will look in the place of honor on your mantel.”

She turned the page.

“Waxmore’s picture is there,” she said.

“For twelve small monthly payments of \$4.95, you can own this—”

“I already have a Bible.”

She continued to thumb the pages. I relaxed. I was cutting it close, but there was still enough time.

Like a used-car salesman, I leaned forward to push the merchandise. The Hound of the Baskervilles hunched, his canines glistening with slobber. *The dog first, then her.*

“Thy shalt not kill!” The old lady spoke like a pulpit minister, full of fire and brimstone. She gave me a look, that penetrating, certain look. My spine tingled.

Her sudden pronouncement—loud and chilling—had thrown me off. My fingers slid away from the candlestick.

“What passage from the Bible moves you, Mr. Smith? I assume you know your Bible.”

“Of course, of course.”

“Then?”

“I have so many.”

“Choose one.”

I hesitated, racking my brain, trying to recall any verse, any line, anything, from those hateful hours of Bible study.

She sat back, sipping her tea, enjoying my fumbling. *Why did I get the feeling that she was toying with me? So she wanted to play. Two could play.*

“The Ten Commandments. How apropos, Mrs. Swanson.”

“How odd, Mr. Smith. I never told you my name.”

“When Charlton Heston says: ‘Thy shalt not kill.’ ”

“ ‘And if any mischief follow, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.’ ”

She smiled. I didn’t like her smile.

The grandfather clock chimed. It was already 11-45. *I shifted forward, preparing for the kill.*

“It won’t work. It’s already too late,” she pronounced like a goddess from on-high.

I dropped all pretense. My voice turned guttural.

“No, it isn’t,” I said.

“My lawyer will be here at noon.”

“But, my *dear* Mrs. Swanson, you won’t be alive.”

I took a long, slow swig of Jack. *Dutch courage.*

“Spirits!” She sniffed with haughty disdain. “Give this up.”

“Not when I stand to make fifty grand.”

“Then I’ll have to dispose of you—like the other that my grandson sent—”

I smirked. And pulled the revolver out of my pocket.

“—bury you, like I buried him, in my garden—where Shadow’s business.”

“Nice sale, Granny. I’m not buying.”

She eyed the gun.

I twirled the cylinder. With each click, I expected her eyes to show fear. They did not. *Any moment, she’s gonna break out in psalm.*

“You’ll never get away with it,” she said, like a scolding schoolmarm.

She passed me a silver salver weighed down with scones.

I acknowledged her gentility by selecting the fattest one, iced with honey and sprinkled with tiny seeds.

“I shouldn’t have let you trip me up with that Bible stuff.” My resentment flared. She’d showed me how low I’d sunk. “I was once a top agent—”

“You’re being poisoned, my *dear* Mr. Smith. Hemlock.”

I knew she was telling the truth. Her eyes glittered with certain malice. *Or was it menace?*

“Soon you will grow jittery. Your legs will tremble, your hands will bloat, your heartbeat will slow, slow, until it stops.”

In terror, I stared at the silver teapot. It sat there so innocently, yet so deadly.

“Don’t be ridiculous, dear,” she said. “I would never spoil a pot of Earl Grey.”

The doorbell pealed with loud persistence, jarring Shadow from his slumber. His monstrous body slammed against the tea tray, sending the salver spinning. It landed with a crash, scattering the scones, breaking them into a million pieces. She charged Shadow, grabbing his collar before he could gobble a single bit.

“My lawyer,” she said softly, too softly.

“He’s early,” I managed to squeak out, as the passages of my throat closed and the world around me dimmed. My life had been saved by a lucky twist of fate.

Her tiny foot swept patterns in the crumbs.

“You’ve won,” she said. “My grandson has won. Let me keep my secrets.”

After that, many years passed before I took another job or saw her again.

I met her, quite by accident, in a sanitarium. Grandson Waxmore had blackmailed her and had taken her money, condemning her to a living purgatory.

But she never did time for trying to bump me off. The sheriff didn’t even prosecute. He saw it as an unfortunate incident, the innocent confusion of a little, old lady who wouldn’t hurt a fly. It was so easy for her, the sheriff concluded, to have mistaken hemlock for anise and to have added a dash to her favorite recipe for Utah scones.

I had no interest in seeing her go to jail. Despite what people say, revenge is rarely sweet. I was only interested in the money, and Waxmore had paid big bucks for the info about the dead guy in the garden. Maybe she should have just changed her will. Instead of cleaving to the Scriptures and seeking some strange Biblical requital. She was now nothing more than a toothless old crone.

Still, I would never forget Mrs. Emmalyne Swanson of Tulsa, Oklahoma, or the way my spine tingled when she gave me that certain look. ■