

REVEREND, I WANT YOU TO PRAY

A Mercury Slim Short Story

by

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Shirley Mae Anderson a devoted church member. The widow of four adult children and grandchildren. You could count on one hand how many times she missed church service. Hopewell baptist her place of worship and the proprietor the Reverend Woodrow L. Price. He gave inspirational sermons that brought his congregation out of their seats: clapping, dancing in the aisle, and singing with the church choir.

Every Sunday a Jamboree and Shirley Mae had front row sitting beside her oldest grandchild, Elise who shared her love of attending service. Price loomed large over six feet tall weighing two-hundred and fifty pounds with his thunderous voice echoing throughout the building. His smile caught everyone's attention and no exception when observing the collection plate making its rounds.

After service Shirley made a beeline to Price's office to praise him for a job well done. Elise went to get the car but hated waiting. She let her grandmother have her moment with the pastor. It was her ritual every Sunday. Shirley's trip this day down the hall toward Price's office different as she heard two strong abrasive voices. She knocked and intervened.

“Reverend Price... everything okay?” Shirley asked.

Price swallowed hard and though he towered over the man with a medium build and height dressed in a burgundy suit. The man wore glasses giving him an intellect look, neat haircut, and clean shave face. He gave Shirley an icy glare. Price seemed nervous.

“Sister Anderson...” Price's eyes bulging and wide. “It's all good.”

The strange man looked as though his talk with Price more than church business.

Price got between Shirley Mae and the man shielding her. “I can't have my usual talk with you, but

next Sunday I'm all yours.”

Shirley Mae nodded. "The sun doesn't shine all the time. You have to make do."

She peeked around Price to dagger eyes. The pastor escorted her out.

Shirley Mae walked down the steps where Elise waited for her arrival sitting inside the blue Toyota Camry. Elise was surprised to see her grandmother earlier than in the past. She'd go to the restroom and still make it back to the car before Shirley Mae.

"That was fast," said Elise. "Everything all right?"

Shirley Mae got comfortable. "He was talking to some man and it didn't sound friendly and when I saw the two of them it looks serious."

Elise frowned looking around her grandmother. "Why is that man staring at you?"

Shirley whirled. "That's him."

"Did you say something to him?" Elise asked. "I don't like the way he's looking at you."

Elise started to get out of the car. Shirley Mae stopped her.

"Child, let it go. Ain't no time for foolishness." Shirley Mae retorted. "People got demons inside them and hopefully Reverend Price can get it out of him. Let's go home."

Elise shook her head. "That still doesn't give him the right to be rude."

"Just pray for him. Pray for him," said Shirley Mae.

Corey Singleton rushed up to Price pressing the bigger man up against the wall.

"Give me her name and address," Singleton demanded.

Price frowned. "She's an old woman. What do you want with her?"

Singleton smiled adjusting his glasses after releasing Price. He stepped back giving the pastor

space. "She barged in like you were in trouble coming to your rescue."

"I told you not to talk business here." Price replied. "You did have a base in your voice."

"So you agree she heard our conversation?"

"I didn't say that... she knew it wasn't pleasant and the way you looked at her made her suspect I may be in trouble."

"You don't answer my calls or texts?" Singleton questioned. "How many people know about your church?"

"You threatening me?" Price asked giving a stern look.

Singleton got moon-eye. He considered Price a bloated pushover. The rise from him impressed Singleton. "Look at you getting salty."

"She's harmless and she comes by after service every Sunday to give me praise."

"A groupie? Singleton questioned with a ghoulish grin. "You ain't swimming inside that old bag are you?"

"You watch your mouth!" Price demanded...

Singleton crossed his heart."Forgot that I'm in the house of the lord."

"You worry too much," said Price.

"That's how I keep businesses rolling." singleton replied."Speaking of rolling, tonight we get back on track."

Price exhaled. "Okay... all right... you get things going again."

"So that cop in your congregation cool it with the questions?"

Price snorted."Told you he was looking for the restroom."

"Glad you put up the signs," said Singleton. "I hope you ain't ignorant that they don't whisper?"

"Where are you going with this?"

"I own a barbershop and people talk while they wait."

Price frowned."You ain't all that busy."

"Hold that thought." Singleton pointed."Church ties.

"What about it?"

"You got a big lavishing house. A luxury car, SUV... the collection plate don't pay for all or none of that." Singleton clarified.

The reverend straightened."We'll be like Butch and Sun-dance jumping off the cliff."

"Well played," said Singleton. "We need each other. We need to be careful. Give me a name and address."

"What are you going to do?" Price asked.

"Things have been going good," Singleton replied.

Price wasn't concerned about his well-being. Singleton needed his church for the dividends it produced. The mysterious door leads to an underground complex built during the prohibition era when making moonshine. Singleton though turned the illegal underground distillery into a coke distribution that Price wasn't hip with, but the money too good to pass up. Singleton hit the bulls-eye commenting about the collection plate not paying for his fine living.

The clergyman's worry was focused on Shirley Mae. He wasn't going to put a loyal member of his congregation in harm's way for a hoodlum like Singleton. "She is no threat to us."

Singleton nodded. "The hard way it is,"

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"Another good service," said Shirley Mae.

"Thank you, sister Anderson, thank you." Price replied."It always fills my heart with joy having you drop by with your praise. He held her one hand in both of his.

Shirley frowned.

Price looked. "Sister Anderson, are you all right? You seem troubled."

Shirley Mae exhaled. "Last week."

Price shrugged taking a seat on the edge of his desk."What's troubling you?"

"I was worried when I heard that man talking aggressively to you."

Price smiles."My guardian angel. What did you hear?"

Shirley Mae shook her head."Nothing but somebody who sounded not happy."

"You need not be concern." Price stood aside putting himself on display."I'm standing in front of you smiling."

Shirley Mae nodded. "Missing our get-together last Sunday made me feel... "

"Naked," said Price.

Shirley Mae got moon-eye."Reverend!"

"Church humor, Sister Anderson. Church humor."

They both laugh.

"If you say so." She turned toward the door."Well, I best be going. Can't keep my granddaughter waiting and I know you have things to do."

"Always a pleasure." said Price escorting her to the door.

"Same time next Sunday." She smiled.

"I look forward to it." Price replied flashing his pearly whites. He pursed his lips after seeing Singleton stepping out from the shadows with dreads wearing a dark gray suit. Price stormed toward the two men. Singleton stepped to his pursuer. They looked like two rams about to butt heads. Singleton took Price by the shoulder then nodded toward the man as if to say follow the woman.

"Why is that man following Sister Anderson?" Price asked.

Singleton smirked."I see a man going on about his business."

"Let's not play games." Price demanded.

“Look,” said Singleton. “We got a good thing going and I want to make sure we keep our business up and running.”

Price frowned. “What that got to do with Sister Anderson?”

“A fly in the ointment?” Singleton shrugged.

Price exhaled. He started thinking the worse. “He doesn't look like no diplomat.”

“You worry too much.”

“The pot calling the kettle black.” Price remarked. “She is not a threat.”

“The way she barged in doesn't sit well with me.”

Price swallowed hard. “The woman has always dropped by after service for a chat. Telling me I did a good job.” He shook his head. “You raise your voice and thought I was in trouble.”

“See...” Singleton pointed. “She heard something and this is business.”

“I don't like the way you make that sound.”

Singleton chuckled. “You want to keep up your fine living?”

“We agreed not by blood.” Price replied.

“Our hands are clean,” Singleton remarked.

Price shook his head. The conversation kept spiraling into something sinister for Shirley Mae. A good-heart widow who he knew heard nothing, but a loudmouth hoodlum speaking aggressively to her pastor. “No harm better not come to Sister Anderson.”

“At the pulpit, you're in Heaven.” Singleton pointed down. “Below is the other place that got you living the high-roller life. You ain't no saint.”

“You are not going to hurt her.”

Singleton walked over to the window looking out. “Hope you don't mind the use of your car?”

Price brushed by him. “I still have my keys.”

Singleton gave a gruesome smile. “I'll give you a ride. We can finish our talk while I drive you

home."

3

Shirley Mae handed the grocery clerk her debit card to pay for her groceries. They shared a cordial conversation while her replenishment got bagged. The employees of the supermarket knew her since she was a regular. They were accustomed to seeing her accompanied by Elise. The two women discuss meats, fruits, and vegetables walking side by side down the aisle. Shirley Mae use to shop with Mister Anderson, but they'd argue over what foods were good and bad for them as they got older. Elise took up the banner after he passed yet Shirley Mae didn't want to be a bother.

She respected her family had their own lives and didn't need to be around an old woman 24/7, but the company was good. Shirley Mae still able to drive and valued her independence. Age was just a number to her. She gathered her two bags without help saying goodbye to the clerk and no need for a cart. Shirley Mae stepped out of the sliding doors looking both ways before heading to her car. A bright sunny day made her smile. Her mind focused on what to cook once she got home. People were shouting, their voices drowned out by a rev up engine.

Shirley Mae felt something hitting her. Blinded by the sunlight while off her feet a childhood memory playing with her siblings in the back yard taking turns on the swing set. She was getting pushed high into the air hanging onto the chains while seated laughing and giggling. Shirley Mae fell out of the seat landing hard on the lawn. Her sisters and brothers came to the rescue getting her up. She landed hard not on grass, but pavement. People gathered and not her family since most of them passed on. Shirley Mae felt excruciating pain and breathless. She heard a car speeding off, people leaning over blocking out the sun. Her eyes felt heavy, she found it hard to breathe, and the pain went away once it got dark.

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Mercury sat in his office he shared with the dollar movie house on South Boulevard. He propped

his feet on the desk leaning back enjoying a cup of coffee. Things were slow and he counted that as a good thing. Mercury didn't hurt for money, the military took care of him and he considered that one of the perks of signing up and being smart with his dividends. He wanted a place away from home to make him want to go home and he found it. Mercury knew for most people in his line of work that would be a bad thing not to have clients bringing drama through their door which made the business move, but he was unique.

He wasn't lonely, the mailman took time to shoot the breeze bringing the mail and the landlord asked from time to time how things were going and if he needed anything. Mercury spotted a young woman pulling up, getting out of her car. Before she got through the door he could see her puffy red eyes.

“May I help you, Miss?” Mercury asked.”

“I hope so,” She replied.

“Have a seat and tell me what troubles you?”

The young woman sat down wiping her eyes.”My name is Elise Anderson and my grandmother was murdered.”

Mercury got up from behind his desk pulling up one of his stray chairs to sit close to Elise who parks herself on the couch near the far wall.”Would you like something to drink? Water? Coffee?”

Elise sniffed. “Coffee.”

Mercury rose. “Cream? Sugar?”

“Cream, please.”

Mercury nodded heading off to the scullery. He came back in a flash handing Elise a steaming cup and a bottle of Coffee-Mate caramel flavor cream. She places her refreshments on the table pouring and stirring at the same time with the thin straw that came with the java. Elise sipped, and closed her eyes nodding.

“How did you hear about me?” Mercury asked.

"Louis Lewis," Elise replied. "He goes to my church.

Mercury straightened. His friend when it suited him. He wanted to frown but, substitute with a deep inhale. Elise young and Louis has used his youthful condition to have flings with women young enough to be his daughter. Mercury hoped Elise wasn't one of them and Louis wasn't using a church as a pick-up spot. He made a mental note to interrogate the ageless Casanova.

Elise frowned. “Are you okay?”

“We're friends when it suits us.”

She smiled. "He's a character, but seems to have a good heart."

"Nobody's perfect," Mercury remarked. "Now, you said your grandmother was murdered."

“She was struck down by a hit and run driver.”

Mercury swallowed hard.”Sounds more like an accident.”

“The car black and had no license plates. Witnesses say the car sped up when she started crossing the street.” Elise fought back tears. “I picked the wrong day not to go shopping with her. I believe he had her rundown.”

“How old was she?”

"Seventy," said Elise.

“You sound like you know who would want to harm her?” Mercury questioned.

“A man who I never saw at church kept glaring at her as if she did something to him. My grandmother was a kind soul.” Elise replied.

Mercury found it hard to believe someone would target an elderly woman unless she walked upon something she shouldn't have.”I have to make sure everything is solid.”

Elise gave a stern look.”She was murdered.”

Mercury shrugged.”Do you know why?”

Elise exhaled. "Two Sundays ago that strange man looking almost like Farrakhan was eyeing a hole through her outside in the parking lot till she got inside the car. She came back early than usual, my grand always stopped by Reverend Price's office to compliment him on delivering a good service."

"Your grandmother never said anything about the man?" Mercury asked.

"It was the first time we both saw him."

"What did the driver look like if anyone saw him?" Mercury questioned.

"Police told me witnesses said he had dreads."

Mercury exhaled knowing in a sarcastic way that narrows it down to a who's who since the hair-style popular.

"I know what you're thinking and I agree, but Louis said he knew the man with the icy stare..." She frowned. "Singleton... Cory Singleton and owns a barbershop. Louis said he knew the man once I described him."

"A preacher and a barber in a heated conversation according to your grandmother?"

"You think there's something to it?" Elise asked.

"I doubt it was about a bad hair cut and your grandmother wouldn't have anything to do with that anyway?"

Mercury pondered putting things together inside his head. Did a conversation lead to a death of an old woman and why? Did Singleton and Price say something that shouldn't be heard? "A black sedan, no license plates, and a dread-headed driver."

"Not enough to go on?"

"You said he sped up when your grandmother started crossing the street so that alone brings suspicion," said Mercury. "Anything else you can add?"

Elise nodded sipping her coffee. "She mentioned every time she went to the mailbox that the same

car would drive by slow with the window halfway down and she felt angry eyes on her. The driver sometimes parked the car down the street in view for my grandmother to see it out her kitchen window."

Mercury frowned shaking his head. The thought of an old woman getting harassed and feeling uncomfortable in her own home didn't sit well with him. His nosy neighbor Mrs. Crabtree came to mind feeling the same if someone hounded her.

"This was a hit and run?" Mercury questioned.

Elise nodded. "Like it was planned."

"And you said no plates?" Mercury inquired. "How about a model?"

Elise pursed her lips. "I think a Lincoln long, black, four-door, rectangle front, and back with a driver wearing dreads."

"And your grandmother said that this Singleton and the Reverend Price sounded like they were arguing." Mercury swallowed hard. "If this caused her death then it bears looking into."

Elise got moon-eye. "Does that mean... "

Mercury stood up offering his hand. "I have a client."

Elise shook his hand. "How much do you charge?"

"Louis will foot the bill," Mercury remarked.

5

Mercury arrived at Louis Lewis estate parking the Cougar inside the circle driveway.

He killed the engine then got out making his way to the grand door pressing the speaker button.

Mercury inhaled anticipating the coming storm.

"You know the drill," Louis stated on the intercom.

Mercury exhaled. "Beatles: John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr. The

Monkees: Peter Tork, Michael Nesmith, Davy Jones, and Micky Dolenz.” He paused. “Ninja Turtles: Raphael, Leonardo, Donatello, and Michelangelo. Musketeers: Athos, Porthos, Aramis, and D'Artagnan. Now open the damn door!”

A chuckle and the door open by Louis's handyman, Rochester shaking his head as if to say why does he continue to do this knowing it's you.

“Rochester.” Mercury nodded. “It's his way of getting back at me.”

The mystery man pointed Mercury to the study while he tailed off to the scullery since he was Louis's Swiss Army knife. The ageless man sat on his sofa in his traditional satin pajamas like a black Hugh Hefner. A dress code not usual to the average person who'd be deck out in a button or polo shirt and slacks. Louis made sure he'd live a life of luxury without the daily grind. A stock market wizard with a habit of using his curse to lure the affection of young women to Mercury's chagrin.

A curse that got him chased to Mercury's house by shot-gun and not for a wedding. The teen said Louis wasn't the father, but Mercury knew better. Louis kept a picture of the Lass on the Mantel above the fireplace. A picture for each year showed how she has her mother looks, but Louis's mid-night complexion. Mercury didn't bother to ask the girl's grandfather if he knew about the year-to-year photos. A hunch the old man had no clue. Mercury figured for the best since the man wanted to put a hole through his when it suits his friend. Louis created a love child with a girl that grew up to be a woman.

"I hope you don't wear that to church?" Mercury suggested. "So, Elise Anderson?" The miscellaneous man stated looking.

"I got plenty of suits and ties for every day of the week and man please," Louis replied rolling his eyes. "Give that shit a rest."

“You know I got to ask.”

"I was tight with her grandmother Shirley Mae and that's how we met," said Louis.

“Wow? That's a switch.” Mercury remarked.

"She wanted to know about the stock market so she could set money for her grand-kids." Louis shook his head.

“You gave her any good leads?”

Louis nodded. "Stock dividends that payout monthly. I was watching over them for her and now I do the same with Elise."

Mercury snorted realizing that's how his name got mentioned thinking the two of them struck up a conversation about Shirley Mae and Elise believing she got murdered. “Let me guess, that's how she ended up at my door.”

Louis shrugged. “I told her if there was foul play, you're the man who could find out. She's a good person.”

“I noticed.” Mercury took a seat across from Louis.” Those dividends for her grandchildren?”

“She'd be proud. They will be comfortable.” Louis replied.

Mercury smiled.”What can you tell me about Shirley Mae?”

“She wouldn't hurt a fly. Loved going to church. Cordial with anybody. You wouldn't be a stranger long once you met her.”

“What about Reverend Price?” Mercury asked.

Louis frowned.”You don't think he has anything to do with her death?”

Mercury swallowed hard.”Got to look at all angles.”

“He seems nice, but I know his lifestyle is questionable.”

“Mercury straightened. “What do you mean?”

Louis inhaled."People talk. He ain't a TV evangelist, but he can't say he's not accustomed to fine living."

Mercury never questioned how ministers got paid or how much money they made yet he never

heard of them having second jobs. "How much you put in the collection plate?"

"Funny man," Louis replied. "I give more to than the average. The man knows how to get the joint jumping."

Mercury laughed. "You got the holy ghost?"

"He makes you feel good going home."

"Impressive even for a sinner like you," Mercury remarked.

Louis grabbed his chest. "That's cold man... I know I'm your friend when it suits you."

"My apology." Mercury bowed.

"I got baptize," said Louis.

Baptism a soap and hot water to wash away your sins. Mercury knew his friend when it suited him was not a bad person yet he used his youthful curse to woo young women. He pondered if Louis had his fingers crossed when getting a dunk in the cleansing water. The ageless wonder did a good deed helping a young woman mourning her grandmother. Mercury didn't want to keep stepping on Louis's toes so he'd keep his judgment to himself for now.

"Elise mentioned a barber name, Cory Singleton."

"A paranoid brother. Loves burning incense." Louis snorted. "Strange character will stare a hole right through you."

"What do you mean paranoid?" Mercury questioned.

"I went to his shop five times." Louis shook his head. "Don't know how he stays open."

"Business that bad?"

Louis shrugged. "You want a quick cut then you go to him without the wait. His shop looks like a garage sale: T-shirts, sweatshirts, over-size pants, ball caps, and whatnot. You have to twist your way to the barber chair. He might have one customer before you, but most times you walk in and instant service."

Mercury got moon-eye."Are there any other barbers?"

"From what I could tell he runs it by himself."

"You mentioned paranoid?"

Louis nodded."Always asking questions or at least me about what I do for a living. Not a trusting guy as if something happened to him and he wants to make sure it won't happen again."

"He still cut your hair?"

Louis inhaled. "One day I got out of his chair paying for the cut and as I walked to the door he was right behind me spitting."

Mercury frowned. "On you?"

"He would've got back-handed." Louis retorted. "I think he was putting a curse on me and it worked since I haven't gone back since."

"Superstitious?" Mercury asked.

"Rude." Louis retorted."You want to be that nasty then you lose a customer."

"So retail his side hustle?"

Louis smirked."I saw the clothes every time I went there."

"What can you tell me about the church?"

Louis pursed his lips."Old... historic... restored... born back in the prohibition era." A smile came across his face.

"What's funny?" Mercury asked.

"You like taking swipes judging me." Louis snorted. "He has a Beyonce poster on his wall and open magazine on the floor of a woman in hot pants squatting for everyone to see."

Beyonce a legendary crooner back in the day decorating the wall of a barbershop... unusual, but a squatting woman in a magazine on the floor... disturbing. Mercury thought that was something you kept discrete for your lone eyes.

“You never seen any other customers?” Mercury asked.

Louis frowned. “One or two and he was almost done every time I walked in, but...”

“Any information you give me may help me solve this murder.”

"I guess you can call them associates," said Louis.

“As in business associates?”

Louis smirk. "The barbershop is more a side hustle. I mean I don't know where or how he lives, but with the lack of customers and he works the shop by himself."

“Describe the men you've seen in his shop?” Mercury asked.

Mercury knew barbershop owners who work with other hair-cutters charging them \$100 a month to keep their chairs. The importance of having a clientele.

Louis pursed his lips. "Young... street smarts rather than corporate. They drove nice cars which doesn't mean they make their living on the wrong side of the law, but being callow and wearing oversize clothing put them on the radar of a bored police officer sitting on the side of the road in a squad car.

Mercury snorted. “Still don't explain why he'd want an old woman dead.”

"Paranoid!" Louis blurted. "The times he cut my hair he gave me the third-degree. Asking me what I did for a living more than once. I didn't tell him my talent for trading stocks and whatnot, but he grilled me like he was trying to protect something."

Mercury nodded thinking what Louis said sounded like a man with something to hide. Elise mentioned her grandmother walked in on what she thought was a heated conversation. Singleton stared at the both of them till they drove out of sight. Whatever Shirley heard or thought she heard got her killed. Mercury's special place in his heart for grandmothers would make sure the perpetrator was brought to justice.

"I know that look," said Louis.

"He's worth looking into," Mercury replied. "When was the last time you got your hair cut?"

"He doesn't cut my hair anymore since the spitting incident." said Louis. "And I got tired of feeling like an undercover agent."

Mercury shook his head. "A barber asking questions like that has something he wants to keep off the radar. Arguing with a preacher like their partners means Price might be corrupt."

"Shirley Mae was a fine woman." Louis retorted.

"When is the funeral?" Mercury asked.

"Saturday," said Louis. "Why?"

"I want to meet this reverend Price."

"He's a good man," Louis replied.

Mercury looked. He didn't need Einstein to know men of the cloth had their dark agendas. Young boys getting molested by men bonded by stricter religions. Celibacy a promise to the church yet some overwhelmed by leading me not into temptation. The miscellaneous man heard and read about preachers making out with their congregation both sexes while married with children standing behind the pulpit without guilt. Price's life a mystery to Mercury, but what he'd be searching for the guilt of Shirley Mae's death on the reverend's face.

6

Mercury got comfortable playing the keys on his desktop. He Google Singleton barbershop. The miscellaneous man got moon-eye reading the scraper had a history with the law. A report written by the MPD stated a barbershop on Monroe road selling non-tax paid liquor to an undercover police officer leading to the arrest of shop owner Corey Singleton. *No wonder he's so paranoid.* Everyone is under suspicion as if he continues to have something to hide. A dangerous man cutting the hair of customers looking for a simple haircut.

He studied the barbershop location making note of it, 4203 Monroe Road, 28205. A picture of the

area came up on the screen. It sat between a beauty salon and a nightclub. The sign above it wasn't fancy with a black background board and white bold letters spelling barbershop and a phone number. Mercury continued to read. A fire inspector alerted investigators back in September two years ago when he did a walk through noticing a billiard table and serving style bar with several bottles of alcohol on the counter.

Mercury shrugged about the billiard table thinking a good way to keep customers waiting for a cut not to get bored but leaving bottles of alcohol on the counter of a serving bar... dumb. If he knew he didn't have a license to serve and if he knew the fire inspector was coming by, then common sense should have kicked in to straighten up the place. *Can you say idiot*, he thought shaking his head. Investigators said the barbershop didn't have a permit to sell alcohol. According to a search warrant, an undercover officer went into Singleton's shop a month later and ordered 16 ounces of beverage.

The warrant issued stated an unknown black male went to the back of the establishment out of sight of the undercover officer and came back with a water bottle filled with non-tax paid liquor. The officer said he asked the man about the bottle and the patron said he paid for it cash in front of the owner, Corey Singleton. Mercury snorted thinking why other coiffeur didn't follow suit, but legal. A good way to the pass time before getting a cut yet be sober in case a barber makes a mistake. He scrolls down the page and reads a longtime customer supporting Singleton saying he is a family man. Mercury smirked.

He Google Hopewell Baptist Church coming up with information about an ancient church dating back to Prohibition. Black and white photos making the setting periodic with a picture capturing his eye. Mercury saw a truck with jugs he assumed to be holding liquor. The house of the lord must have had a distillery. He noticed the church background with a hill. Such an establishment must contain a cellar or basement and an engineer could draw a layout of an underground business. A moonshine venture makes a good profit for those manipulating the law.

It was shut down, but with influence and deep-pocket backing, all you would need is an in-between liaison to run things and that would be Cory Singleton. Mercury didn't want to take down the conglomerate... he just wanted the man he believed behind the death of Shirley Mae Anderson.

7

Mercury attended Shirley Mae's funeral. The woman he heard good things about from her granddaughter and his friend when it suited him got a respectful send-off. The miscellaneous man commended the reverend for a job well done inside and out at the graveside. Mercury saw Elise sitting with the rest of the brood grieving. He got her attention nodding his respect.

Slim parked the Cougar close to the church hoping to catch Price at the right time. Mercury leans back resting his eyes. He awoke to hear a car drive up. Mercury saw a long black luxury limousine pull up next to his car. Price got out ignoring him making a beeline to the church. Mercury eased out of his heap.

"Reverend," said Mercury. "Reverend Price,"

Price whirled around to see who was calling his name. He studied the long-fit athletic man wearing a paper-boy cap. The man offered his hand.

"Mercury Slim."

Price shook it. "What can I do for you?"

"You gave a good sermon.."

Price flinched a smile. "Thank you, Mister Slim."

Mercury swallowed hard. "I won't talk about the death of Shirley Mae Anderson."

Price frowned. "Are you a cop?"

"I was hired by her granddaughter."

"Follow me to my office," said Price.

Both men got comfortable. Mercury parked himself in front of Price's desk and Price made himself at home behind it.

"I heard it was a tragic accident," said Price.

Mercury snorted. "Wish it was that simple."

"I don't understand?"

"Elise believes foul play is at hand." Mercury retorted.

Price gasped putting his hands together as if to pray. "This must be a mistake. Sister Anderson wouldn't be involved in anything sinister."

"That's what I'm looking into."

"You say you're not the police?"

"I call what I do miscellaneous affairs. Murders, harassment, or anything that endangers the innocent then I'm the man to call."

"I see." Price nodded unfolding his hands making a V-shape covering his mouth supporting his chin. "Could you give me more clarity?"

Mercury smirked. "Elise said a man was staring a hole through her and Shirley Mae after Shirley heard angry voices." Mercury exhaled. "Not long after that, Shirley Mae is dead."

Price's neck constricted as if he wore a noose. He cleared his throat taking a deep breath to relax his nerves. A sign Mercury saw as hitting a nerve. "The family believes she was murdered and I looking into it."

The reverend straightens in his chair. "The conversation got tense, but nothing Sister Anderson heard or thought she heard should not have anything to do with her death."

Mercury shrugged. "I read the police report, she was crossing the street carrying her groceries and got hit by a car."

“Well.” said Price getting moon-eye. “Sounds like an accident.”

"A hit and run make it a crime," Mercury stated. "The fact that bystanders say the car sped up is what getting my ire." He shook his head. "The car they describe looked much like yours."

Price swallowed hard. “You're not implying?”

Mercury pursed his lips. “Oh no. There are a lot of cars like yours and the driver wore dreads. You have a thinning mini Afro. The car didn't have any plates and yours does.”

Price's body deflated like a balloon.”Lord have mercy.”

“That you're not a suspect?” Mercury inquired.

"On the soul of the person who has failed to come forth." Price remarked. "You say the driver's hair dreads."

Mercury scanned the office.”You've done good restoring this cathedral. A lot of history... secrets.”

“City council and money from the congregation.” Price replied.

“Money from the plate? You're generous.”

Price swallowed. “I love my church.”

"Serving the Lord is profitable."

“Is the police looking for the driver?” Price asked.

"Turn over the right rock... who knows. Elise mentioned her grandmother saying a man kept driving by every time she went to the mailbox and parking his car where she could see him from her kitchen window," said Mercury.

“A lot of things happen outside of this church I'm not aware of.”

“What puzzles me,” Mercury frowned. “All this after she came to your rescue.”

“She walked in on a disagreement that was handled after she left.”

Mercury pointed. “Yet he followed her out of the church and stared till they drove out of sight.”

“Maybe he fancied Elise. She's a fetching young woman.” Price remarked.

“With an evil-eye glare?” Mercury questioned. “Strange.”

"I wasn't there," said Price.

Mercury shrugged. “Going on what Elise said.”

“I hope she finds closure.”

Mercury rose to offer his hand to Price who took it. The miscellaneous man slips a business card in the reverend's hand.

“My card in case you remember anything.” Mercury nodded and left.

Price jumped on the phone. “We need to talk.”

8

Singleton raced to the church. He stood in front of Price as if a stick wedged up his ass.

Price gritted his teeth. “You used my car for a rundown?” He shook his head. “Lord have mercy.”

"I bet she said the same thing seeing that car barreling down on her," Singleton smirked.

Price glared. “ You think murdering an old woman is funny?”

"I'm protecting our business."

“I am not a murderer.” Price stated.

Singleton flashed a gruesome grin. “You didn't pull the trigger, but you own the gun.”

Price sat down behind his desk reaching inside his drawer taking out a bottle of hooch. He took a long drink then frowned off the side effect. "I knew something wasn't right... you harassed Shirley Mae then run her down like a dog in the street."

Singleton shrugged. “Had to keep you in the loop. You sounded like you were about to stray.”

Price took another crack at the bottle. "I don't care how or when I want out."

Singleton braced himself on Price's desk. “You think the collection plate going to continue your fine living?”

Price's face buried inside his hands breathing heavy. He lifted his head giving Singleton a look. The church bottom level was used for wine then contraband during the earlier days. Prohibition benefit from the cathedral keeping the law at bay then undercover agents infiltrated shutting it down till Price convince the city the house of the lord would be used for churchgoers. The reverend met Singleton who sold him on the idea of a profitable side hustle. Murder though not part of the deal.

"You're in too deep now and one day at a time will help you forget about the old woman," said Singleton.

Price exhaled. "I told you she didn't hear a thing."

Singleton shrugged. "Got to dot the I's and cross the T's."

A knock on the door and the dread-headed man walk in. Price got moon-eye. He rushed the man clamping his hands around his throat. Singleton stepped in separating the two men.

"You crazy old man?" said the Dread-headed man reaching behind his back getting stopped by Singleton shaking his head.

Price swallowed hard. "I don't allow firearms in the house of the lord."

Singleton leads the man to a corner whispering in his ear. Dread-head nodded then gave Price an icy glare walking out the door.

"He is to never set foot in my church again," said Price.

"Topside anyway," Singleton remarked.

"My God!" Price gasped."He's the one... you made me an accessory to murder."

"Took you long enough to catch on."

Price grabbed his chest and sat back down. "How do you expect me to drive that car?"

"Sit behind the wheel, turn the ignition, and well you know the rest."

"You are a heartless bastard," said Price.

"I'm a businessman," Singleton replied.

Price pursed his lips. "The granddaughter, Elise hired a man to look into Sister Anderson's death."

Singleton straightens and got moon-eye adjusting his glasses. "You just telling me this now?"

Price beamed. He enjoyed the stressed look on Singleton's face. The reverend feared for his future about his side hustle, but his religious side wanted this sinner to feel some heat for his wrongdoing.

"Is that why you asked me to come over?" Singleton questioned. "Is he still here?"

"You look worried," said Price. The clergyman pondered why his unholy partner acted paranoid. He didn't know everything about the barber, knew his location on the outskirts of the city where he worked wasn't a magnet attracting customers. He met Singleton after one of his services and as a good nature man he met him in his office. Singleton gave him more information than he already knew about the church's history. He convinces Price the side hustle would be profitable and he was right. Price not ignorant knowing the collection plate could do but so much for his cost of living. He didn't want a 9 to 5 part-time job and he got used to being his boss.

Price saw no problem using the lower part of the cathedral to make illegal liquor. It would hurt the government's pocket for not paying taxes and that was fine with him. His gamble paid off reaping the benefits. It bothered him when Singleton expanded the contraband, wine... they drank vino in the bible. Moonshine... he got concerned. A Methlab made him worry. Price became blind as long as no one got hurt... until now. Sweet Sister Anderson died because a paranoid hoodlum plotted her death using his car making him a culprit. The guilt started weighing heavy on him.

"Earth to the preacher man," said Singleton. "He ain't the police so no worries."

Price rose to hand Singleton a card.

"What's this miscellaneous shit? Singleton frowned looking the card over. "Mercury Slim?"

"The investigator." Price replied. "Police or not he could still be a problem."

"Does he know who I am?"

Price shook his head. "Your name never came up."

"Good answer," Singleton remarked. "Act natural and everything will be like Sister Shirley Mae. Dead and buried."

Price shook his head. "He mentioned the car and a dread-head driver." He swallowed hard. "I can't drive that car!"

"You can and you will," said Singleton. "Act natural. You dump the car and he will be on you like a skin tag you can't get rid of."

"It was used for murder."

"Consider it an initiation into the brotherhood," Singleton said giving a stern look. "I go down... you go down."

Price inhaled grabbing his chest.

"Don't die on me now preacher," said Singleton. "Then again if things go south I could spin this all on your good name."

"The good Lord ain't ready for me yet." Price replied.

"Glad to hear it," Singleton remarked.

Price shook his head. "I wouldn't feel right driving that car. How can I face my congregation?"

Singleton laughed. "Think of those Catholic Priest, molesting those boys and standing at the pulpit as if no wrongdoing."

Price swallowed hard. A devoted man of God turning the other cheek for greed. Underneath his church, illegal alcohol, and Meth produced in the house of worship. The money was good and he couldn't argue that. He felt the need to enjoy the luxuries of life and currency made it possible for him to get accustomed to fine living. Now, Singleton, this demon brought murder to his door, telling him to keep driving his death machine to keep the miscellaneous man from suspicion.

The clergyman pointed. "You keep that dread-head heathen from setting foot in my church again!"

Singleton nodded. "Consider it done."

“You have to be discreet in case this Mercury Slim keeps snooping around.”

Singleton smiled. “Glad we're getting on the same page.”

“Lord have mercy on my soul.” Price murmured.

9

Mercury sat at his desk in the Queen Park business located on South Boulevard. His office conjoined with a dollar movie fleapit. A benefit he liked for perks of watching movies for free based on an agreement to do light security for the owner. He didn't have a lot of clients which for him was a good thing since either someone needed protection or a loved one died because of foul play like his current client. Mercury leaned back taking a deep breath. The bells above his front door jingled.

Elise popped in for an update after getting his text. She exhaled taking a seat. “You said you had something to ask me?”

“How well do you know Reverend Price?” Mercury asked leaning forward on his desk.

Elise shrugged. “He's a good man... like anybody he's not perfect, but who is?”

“What kind of car does he drive?”

Elise snorted. “A black Lincoln Continental.”

“Did your grandmother describe what type of car she saw outside her kitchen window and drove by when she walked to the mailbox?” Mercury asked.

“A long black sedan,” Elise replied. “It wasn't the reverend since he doesn't wear dreads.”

Lincoln Continental is a long sedan and black is a popular color, thought Mercury. The car though had no plates and Elise has yet to say her grandmother mentioned the actual model. Mercury's gut told him the reverend's car was the one that ran her down.

Elsie inhaled. “She said a man with hair like snakes kept driving up and down the street giving her the evil eye when she came out of the house.”

Mercury clenched his fist. He hated hearing the elderly getting harassed and bully. “I need you to be

calm and not do anything drastic for what I am about to tell you.”

Elise nodded exhaling sitting up straight. “That's why I came to you. If something needs to be done, you have my blessing.”

"Justice," said Mercury. "I believe the car in question belongs to Reverend Price."

Elise got moon-eye and then frowned “I'm confused.”

“He didn't authorize it and unaware his car would be used for murder. He and Singleton are involved in something and the incident with your grandmother sealed Price's involvement in what they're doing.”

Elise shook her head. “You're making it sound like the reverend's breaking the law?”

"He wouldn't be the first," Mercury replied. "I think he had no idea what Singleton's plans were with his car."

“Then he knows Singleton had something to do with my grandmother's death.”

Mercury nodded.

"My grandmother held him to such high standards." She said. "We need to go to the police."

Mercury shrugged. "Tell them what?"

"You said they are breaking the law."

"I don't know what they are doing or who is working with them," said Mercury. "They'd throw a blanket on everything and your grandmother's murder would be an accident or a cold case."

Elise knew cold case meant shelved away for years and she didn't want that. Shirley Mae deserved swift justice. “We can't have that.”

Mercury nodded. “I keep digging... bound to come up with something.”

Elise exhaled. “I don't think I can go to church anymore. I don't think I can look at him.”

"Sit on the front row," Mercury stated.

“Pardon?”

"Keep up appearances," said Mercury. "Let him get a good look at you."

"A close look at the guilt on his face?"

Mercury nodded. "Time to turn up the heat."

"You think he told Singleton about you?" Elise asked.

Mercury leaned back. "Trouble is what I do."

"You told me so much... yet we seem so far away."

Mercury felt he might have said too much to his client. Elise breathed heavy talking about the reverend told him she wanted a confrontation. He hopes her emotions wouldn't get the best of her.

"Did I tell you too much?" Mercury asked.

"I will act normal, Mister Slim."

10

Price gave his Sunday speech, but his congregation wasn't entranced by his words as previous Sundays. One person had an inclination that made the preacher seem to lack his pizzazz and she sat in front burning a hole through his soul. Price fought hard not to make eye contact with Elise. Church members whispered among themselves about the demeanor of the man who had no problem whipping them into a frenzy. Hopewell baptist was a shouting, dancing in the aisle, jumping for joy cathedral. Not this day and some pondered if this would become the norm.

Reverend Price stuttered, paused, and frowned as if he forgot what he wanted to talk about. He inhaled and exhaled like trying to catch his breath after a morning run. He looks around his church like a stranger in a foreign land. One of his deacons walked up to him asking if he was okay. Price nodded and smiled then went back to battle with his words. He felt relief when the choir sang giving him a break to sit down to drink a glass of water. The church got energized for a brief moment. Price returned to the podium struggling to finish service and when he did a sigh of relief swept through

Hopewell's baptist church almost leading to a stampede toward the exit.

Price made it back to his office. He slumped down in his chair wiping a tear from his eye that he knew was for his fallen church member Shirley Mae. He missed seeing her on the front row and now no more visits to compliment him on a well-done service. He looks at his door feeling a presence. Price rose from his chair, he inhaled and opened the door. Elise stood in the doorway. She gave a stern look, shook her head, and walked away.

11

“You sure that preacher ain't going to crack?” Dreads asked.

"He's got too much to lose," Singleton replied.

Dreads rub his chin. “I'll find us a new location. We don't need that church.”

"Stay in your lane." Singleton retorted looking. "Thinking doesn't suit you."

Singleton shook his head. He kept his dread-head goon in the dark and glad he did. Investors help put together the church operation enabling them to expand and to shake things up would be serious consequences.

“I'm just saying now that the cloth knows what went down, he might not be able to handle it.”

"I'll worry if cops show up and so far the PO-PO has stayed away," said Singleton.

"All right man, whatever you say, but is everything cool?"

“What do you hear?” Singleton asked.

Dreads shrugged. “They looking for a black sedan and I took the plates off.” He ran his hand through his dreads. “I ain't the only one sporting this style. No static this way.”

Singleton snorted. “Not from the police.”

“What going down?” Dreads asked.

Singleton handed Dreads a card.

Dreads gave a dubious look. "Mercury Slim... miscellaneous?"

Singleton shrugged. "I drew a blank on the miscellaneous, but he looking into this shit."

He sat down on an empty barber chair. "Thought you should... this ain't solid."

Dreads nodded. "This ain't going away as we thought."

"Nothing's ever easy," Singleton replied.

Singleton leaned back in his thoughts. If Dreads could read his mind he'd know Singleton considered he and the reverend expendable. He was the head on the snake with no intention of having it cut off. He heard about snakes surviving without their tails.

"You want me to look into this cat?" Dreads asked.

Singleton took off his specs fogging them up with his breath wiping the glasses clean with a tissue.

"He might mess with our money."

Dreads placed the card in his pants pocket.

"Do your homework before taking the test," said Singleton. "He sounds like he can handle himself."

Dreads waved him off. "It's a damn name and it ain't Superman."

Mercury sat at his desk staring at his desktop. He was reading over Singleton's arrest file for serving unlicensed liquor to an undercover officer. The bells above the entrance door jingled. Mercury rubbed his weary eyes wondering who came calling. Darryl Pulley dropped by from time to time to shoot the breeze. Bella surprises him with lunch and chats about her new gig as a plus-size fashion model. Mercury got up to greet his guest. He got surprised when he saw twenty-one-year-old Vanessa. A college student working at the dollar cinema. Her '5 8" 125lb. lean body donned a white blouse, red ribbon necktie, black vest and skirt above the knee, and black heels. She carried a tray with a box of

popcorn, medium cup fountain drink, and kit kat. They connected when Mercury took in a picture show.

"Hey girl," said Mercury. "Things must be slow?" He took the tray placing on the desk waiting for a receptionist to sit behind it.

She smiled. "Things will pick up tonight like they always do."

Mercury nodded. "It is a Friday night and everyone loves the weekend. He picked up a popcorn tossing it in his mouth."

"Can I ask you a question?" Vanessa asked.

Mercury sat on the edge of the desk. "Sure."

"I know on the door it says your name and miscellaneous. Are you an investigator or something?"

"If it's in my skill set then I take it on," said Mercury.

"Is what you do dangerous?"

"It can be," Mercury replied.

Vanessa frowned. "So you might have people out to get you?"

Mercury shrugged. "I been fortunate so far,"

"Okay," Vanessa snorted.

Mercury gave a dubious look. "What?"

Vanessa inhaled raising her youthful bosom. "When I was bringing you food, a silver car parked up on the hill and a man got out, sat on the hood making himself comfortable looking down watching your office."

Mercury got moon-eye. "You don't say." He stepped to his window peering through the crack blinds. "Perfect." He'd hope for sloppiness and got it to pave his way for a chance meeting with Singleton. The Miscellaneous man's intuition told him the goon worked for the barber and maybe the man who ran down Shirley Mae Anderson.

“Mind doing me a favor?” Mercury asked.

The young woman beamed with excitement. Mercury knew she had a mad crush on him. She wore leggings staying in the color code of black. Vanessa bend, squat, sat when Mercury came to the concession for a soft drink. She wore them once making him figure too many leering eyes made her uncomfortable. Vanessa's slacks and skirts showed her figure in a tasteful manner favoring her butt. Mercury handed her the box of goodies she brought.

"He looks hungry," said Mercury.

“Should I be worried?”

Mercury glance out the window. His baby-sitter no longer sat on his hood.

“Place the food on his hood and if he gets out of the car, give him my regards. Then walk back calm and cool.”

Vanessa strolled up the hill and did as instructed. Dreads got out of his car wearing a frown.

"He sends his regards," said Vanessa as she pivoted heading back to the office.

Mercury stood out front waving with his back against the wall. Dreads move to the hood and with one swipe he knocked the refreshments off his car. He got inside his vehicle and sped off. Mercury smiled, *thanks for the invite*, he thought.

“Think he got the message?” Vanessa asked.

Mercury took off his paperboy cap rubbing his head. “Time for a haircut.”

“Wish I could tag along.”

Mercury shook his head. “You'll have plenty of time for excitement.”

“Promise?”

Mercury didn't know where Vanessa was going with her comment but knew he needed an escape. He took out his cell and she grabbed it.

“Hey!” said Mercury. “What are you doing?”

Vanessa punched in her number. “You cool and just in case I need protection.” She tested his phone calling her own from his then gave it back to him.

Mercury looked to the parking lot. “Starting to get crowded.”

Vanessa nodded. “Yeah, you got work to do.” She whirled heading back to the movie house.

13

4203 Monroe Road. Singleton's barbershop sandwich between a nightclub, auto-body shop, pawnshop, and hair salon. Mercury drove past an Ethiopian eatery called the Red Sea. They displayed a menu of meats on the marquee from beef, chicken, fish, and goat made it authentic. The Cougar found its place between faded parking lines near a street light post at the edge of the lot. Mercury surveyed the business village. Louis Lewis was right when he said not a packed house. He opened the glove compartment looking at his Glock and it stared back.

Mercury closed it shaking his head. “No firearms.” He muttered. The miscellaneous man assumed like most businesses no weapons allowed. Mercury looked at his hair in the rear-view mirror rubbing his hand over his head then put on the black paperboy cap. “Showtime.”

He opened the door and saw the bifocal face man sitting where customers sat watching TV. The seating area is surrounded by incense and T-shirts. Singleton a hustler trying to make money any way he could even selling unlicensed liquor. Mercury respected side hustles except for the ones putting lives in danger. He figured the man on the hill belongs to Singleton and knew Price reached out to him. Mercury intuition told him Singleton's man had yet to contact him which he gambled leaving his gun in the car. Singleton got up and Mercury couldn't help notice the open magazine page on the floor of a woman squatting wearing hot pants. Louis Lewis was right again.

“Can I help you?” Singleton asked.

Mercury took off his hat. "I need a trim."

Singleton acts like a matador giving him free passage to take a seat. Mercury developed thoughts whether if this was a cat and mouse game. He pondered if Singleton's man told him what he looked like and thought it was best to get him in the chair where he could use a straight razor to slit his throat. Mercury wanted a haircut and electric razors were used for that so if he picked up a straight razor then the gig would be up. Singleton placed a white sheet over him covering his lap then tapered a strip around his neck. He clicked on the electric razor.

“What can I do you for?” Singleton asked.

"A tight fade," Mercury replied. Either Singleton was a good actor or he didn't hear back from his man telling him what he looked like. So far a basic haircut.

“Where you from if you don't mind me asking?” Singleton questioned. “I try to start a conversation to make the customers feel comfortable.”

"I understand," said Mercury. "Born and raised right here."

“What you do for a living?”

Mercury shrugged. "Anything that pays the bill... no career-type jobs to speak of. Security, courier, and bartending."

Singleton snorted. "Hey, it tough out there. Do what you got to do."

Mercury shook his head. “Yeah, my resume` is miscellaneous.”

The haircutting came to a halt. Mercury caught a glimpse of Singleton's eyes almost bulging out from his glasses. The front mirror is covered with a newspaper celebrating the football team going to the Superbowl five years ago. The trim continued with Singleton swallowing hard. Mercury kept an eye on the barber's reflection. He smirked thinking about the old west when a gunslinger with a reputation sat in the barber's chair pressing his gun in the cutter's gut to make sure he kept a steady

hand. It kept the barber honest keeping him from slitting his throat.

Time has changed since this barber uses electric clippers for his handy work. Singleton paused to answer his cell. Mercury bobbed his head playing a tune to himself glancing in the mirror at the barber. Singleton put his cell inside his back pocket then grabbed a can of shave cream, and a straight razor. He gave Mercury a hot towel facial then rub cream around his hairline. Mercury thought about the old west seeing the razor in Singleton's hand.

“Everything all right?” Mercury asked.

"I get interrupted sometimes in the middle of work," Singleton responded.

"Family comes first," Mercury remarked keeping an eye on the razor touching the edges of his forehead. So far so good no funny business. The gunfighter alert still in effect, the man ordered the murder of an old woman. Mercury remembered watching a western and a barber not looking like the typical hair-cutter placing the razor on the gunfighter's neck, but gave him an excellent shave to avoid getting a bullet.

“You think the football team going to be good this year?” Singleton asked.

Mercury pursed his lips. “They kept the core of their key players and signed some quality through free agency and had a solid draft.”

“Damn man,” said Singleton. “You know your football.”

"Watched a lot of it growing up," Mercury remarked. "Played in high school."

“Oh yeah? What position?”

“Wide-receiver.” Mercury smiled. “Made all-state, but hitting the books wasn't my thing so off to the military.”

"Don't know what you do for a living, but you seem in good spirits," said Singleton.

"Being your boss can do that," Mercury replied.

“Get no argument from me.”

“Do things by your own set of rules.” Mercury snorted. “They call you an outlaw 'cause you don't follow the rules.”

Singleton inhaled and nodded. “Like it or not money rules the world.”

“Got to do what you got to do.” Mercury retorted.

"Yeah," said Singleton. "That's what I'm talking about."

“At any cost, right?”

Singleton shrugged. “You got something going, you can't let nobody stop you.”

Mercury nodded. “Got to keep it flowing.”

“Sounds like a man after my own heart.” Singleton retorted.

Mercury cleared his throat. “If the weak, old, and frail get in your way you squash them.”

Singleton snorted. "At the end of the day, it's all about you."

Mercury cachinnate.

“Did I say something funny?” Singleton asked.

“No.” Mercury swallowed hard. “What just came to me is not funny at all, rather horrific. Not that long ago an old woman got ran down by a dread-head driver in a black sedan.” He shook his head.

“Guess she must have gotten in his way.”

Singleton exhaled gripping the straight razor and handed Mercury a mirror. “Want me to touch up your mustache?”

"No I'm good," said Mercury shaking his head glancing at the mirror. "I take care of my facial hair."

Singleton unravels the sheet around Mercury's neck. A car pulled up in front of the shop. Dreads walked in recognizing the miscellaneous man taking out his Glock.

“No fool!” Singleton blurted. “They'll hear the shot.”

The parking lot was sparse, but the auto shop and salon open for business. Dreads tried using the gun like a hammer coming down toward Mercury's head. Mercury used the back of his noggin butting

Singleton in the face causing blood from he barber's nose then tossed up the sheet at Dreads for a distraction. A foot to the gut winded him and Mercury ducked a swiping razor getting out of the chair. The miscellaneous man retaliated with a glancing right cross to Singleton's chin knocking him back. He fell between the sea of T-shirts and incense holding the straight razor. Mercury saw Dread's reflection in the back mirror advancing to him and delivered a backward kick to his abdomen.

Mercury whirled grabbing dreads throwing him at Singleton who cut his own man on the side of his face trying to slice Mercury. The deep cut made Dreads grimace. Singleton lost his balance knocking over bottles on the counter. Dreads dripping blood rose to grit his teeth. Mercury gave him an open hand knife blow crushing his larynx to a sickening crack. Dreads got moon-eye clutching his throat falling face-first to the floor holding his wind-pipe.

"That was for Shirley Mae Anderson," Mercury muttered.

The mirrors in the barbershop worked as Mercury's ally allowing him to see Singleton rise coming for him. The barber got a fierce back-heel kick to his chin. He dropped the razor with his chin pointed toward the ceiling. His head came back to normal position staring at Mercury like a deer in headlights. Singleton fell to the floor in slow motion making a thump. The miscellaneous man reached down checking for a pulse... he was relieved Singleton still breathed. He searched the body grabbing his cell. Mercury thumb through the list of names till he found Price. The reverend got a text to meet at the church in his office.

Mercury waited until the clergyman's response. He did. Mercury called Bolden telling him to get his boys and an ambulance to 4203 Monroe Road and meet him at Hopewell baptist church with a search warrant. He asked Bolden to make sure Price would be alone in his office and leave the preacher to him.

The drive to Hopewell Baptist Church long and slow. The circus in town how Mercury saw the situation with police escorting men out the cathedral from the depths below in handcuffs. He parked on the side of the road killing the engine. No officer bothered to stop him to ask his business, Bolden must have described him to his men and he was cool with that. Mercury made it to the hallway making a beeline to the pastor's office. He arrived at the door to knock but instead tried the knob turning it slow after hearing a man blubber on the other side.

Mercury opened the door and saw a Price sitting at his desk crying like a child. The miscellaneous man sensed not because his lifestyle coming to an end, but feeling guilt for Shirley Mae Anderson's death. The woman who came by every Sunday to praise him on how he delivered the word of God. Price lifted his head feeling a gentle hand on his shoulder. He looks at Mercury through teary bloodshot eyes with peace in them. His face laid on Mercury's hand and the miscellaneous man didn't mind.

"What... do you want?" Price asked.

"Reverend," said Mercury. "I want you to pray."

THE END.

