

GRAY AREAS



Marvin Gray

COPYRIGHT

Gray Areas

E-book, 1st edition 2013

Text by Marvin Gray

eISBN 978-616-222-252-8

Published by www.booksmango.com

E-mail: info@booksmango.com

Text & cover page Copyright© Marvin Gray

No part of this book may be reproduced, copied, stored or transmitted in any form without prior written permission from the publisher.

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. It may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you are reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please purchase your own copy.

Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

DEDICATION

For my father, who has always treated me as a friend.

CHAPTER ONE

Monday

This had been coming to a head for months. Ever since my son Josh was murdered in Los Angeles by a criminal gang linked to a Mexican drug cartel, thugs working for the cartel had been searching for a set of ledgers that had landed in my lap during a case I was investigating. I had no idea what the Spanish financial records meant or what their value was. So instead of turning over the ledgers to the criminals, I stubbornly resisted. Had I known that the stupid books would get my son killed, I would have gladly handed the damned things over.

But hindsight and regret go hand in hand. I fled to Kentucky, where I started nursing a nervous breakdown and toying with suicide. My unstable emotional state had risen to a simmer a few days ago when small-time mafia boss Ross Levin sent his muscle to torture the location of the ledgers out of me. They messed me up pretty bad, but a friend of mine, Mia Thompson, followed us to the cellar where they held me, and helped me escape. Levin retaliated quickly. They found Mia's body buried at a construction site in Charleston, West Virginia. The tension boiled almost out of control when washed-up boxer Manny Rodriguez, who had once been Mia's lover, told me he was coming to Cincinnati, Ohio to make Levin pay. Then, just minutes ago, the pressure had reached a steaming squeal when I walked into John Avery's Tavern and confronted Levin and his band of thugs.

Among them was Doctor Herman Weiss, a South African intellectual and organized criminal who traded in blood and stolen Middle Eastern antiquities. As other mobsters did with blood diamonds in Africa, Weiss dealt in the lucrative black market of Babylonian, Sumerian, and Acadian artifacts looted from the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad and other Iraqi sites. This business meant murder, kidnapping, and the rape

of innocent civilians and complicit competitors—and their families—all in order to increase his profit margins. I had locked horns with Weiss's underlings in Iraq, and walked away the loser each time. Meeting him tonight brought back a bundle of traumatic memories and unsettled scores.

Sitting around the table to Levin's right was Bobby Scruggs. The moose of a man was dying to kill me. He was the older brother of Bennie Scruggs, long-time hired muscle for Levin. A few days ago, Bennie and his accomplice Anthony were the ones who'd locked me in a cellar in Kentucky, bound me, and given me a thorough beating in an effort to get the location of the ledgers out of me. I hobbled out of that dungeon with a concussion and a number of broken bones in my right hand and foot. Bennie and Anthony weren't so lucky. I painted the stone floor with the hooligans' blood. Or that's what Mia told me, anyways.

I ain't no tough guy. No one's ever accused me of that. It's just that Mia had snuck into the cellar to rescue me. So when Anthony knocked her down and proceeded to kick her into submission, something in me snapped. I don't remember it none too well. I just recall the sordid feel of blood and hair and crushed skull caked beneath my nails, clasped inside my fists, and wedged between my wrists and duct tape and the wooden chair arms I'd bludgeoned them with. I felt the hedonistic satisfaction of revenge, even if the memory was not chronological or clear.

Bennie was laid up in some hospital somewhere sucking on a ventilator tube in the fight of his life. I have no idea if Anthony made it or not, and didn't give a fuck.

Bobby Scruggs was itching to finish the job on me his brother had started. The only thing holding him back was a short leash held tight by Ross Levin. And Levin was constrained only by his greed. Levin wanted those ledgers for the payday they represented. But I had hid them well, and I was gonna hold out as long as I could, make it as difficult for Levin and his band of

well-dressed pirates as possible.

I knew I was about to take a beating. I don't know if you have ever been in a situation where you know you are going to suffer a whipping that's gonna take weeks to recover from, but I gotta be honest with you: It sucks. It made me nauseous from my waist to my neck. My head was light. My hands and arms and legs were trembling. My brain was scrambling in search of a way out, however unrealistic. A sense of overwhelming dread soaked my entire being, slowly suffocating me. I wanted to flee, needed to breathe, surface for air. I was clinging to the irrational hope of a painless escape from this bar, but deep down I knew it wasn't gonna happen.

I knew I was too stubborn to just submit the ledgers without resisting these goons who'd killed Mia. I hated pain nearly as much as I hated bullies. And I would have tried almost anything to avoid the beating that was coming. But there were entirely too many unsettled scores in the room yet to be tallied up to just let me walk out unharmed. I had not yet recovered from that cellar thrashing and did not look forward to this one tonight.

Levin was a former amateur boxer we called the Cincinnati Pit Bull. People seldom got the chance to cross Levin twice. I had messed with him a number of times, and I had lived to rub it in, so Ross was sporting a healthy grudge. Although he was a bit of a germaphobe when it came to particularly dirty jobs, I suspected he would take particular pleasure in rolling up his sleeves and making an exception this time. Bobby, older and meaner than his brother, could almost taste my forthcoming punishment. He wasn't the self-disciplined type of hoodlum who could extend my suffering. He'd want to finish me off with his dukes and a lead pipe. Professor Weiss was a wild card. While he was responsible for his share of carnage in the Middle East, I had no idea if he'd participate in my gang beating when the time came. But I wouldn't put it past the old bastard.

The fourth man in the tavern's back room was Hamish Morrison, a fat, balding investor from Belgium, whom I doubted

could pose much of a threat when the cauldron of tension boiled over into scalding violence.

I'd sized up Levin and his three underworld companions best I could. I swallowed and faced up to the whippin' I was gonna suffer and came to one single conclusion.

Fuck the whole lot of 'em!

My only hope of limping out of this closed bar alive was Mia's former lover, Manny Rodriguez. Manuel 'Manny' Rodriguez was an aging, washed up, onetime Super Feather Weight contender, who had been salivating to avenge Mia's death. I'd hoped he'd show up soon to save my worthless ass.

But Ross Levin was too smart for me. And too smart for Manny. Too smart by a long shot. Through all this pent up tension in the room, Levin remained cool and calm. And that bothered me. I posed about as much physical threat to him as an egret on a white rhino's ass. Levin had already prevented Bobby Scruggs from bashing me with his fists once tonight, and I knew I wouldn't be so lucky next time.

So when Levin made me sit and ordered me a drink, I capitulated. A good 17-year old Scotch is one of my weaknesses. I'm quite an accomplished lush. I don't deny it. Alcohol has its advantages, like giving false courage and acting as a general anesthetic. I needed both right now.

As I sipped my drink, Levin turned up the volume on the flat screen so we could hear the news teaser.

"After the game," the local TV announcer said, "WLWT News 5 will bring you the latest on this breaking story. Onetime Super Feather Weight contender, Manuel 'Manny' Rodriguez, shot dead today in yet another dark episode of his troubled life. In what appears to be a drug-related shooting, Rodriguez was found shot dead in his car along with an unidentified woman, thought to be his girlfriend, in Charleston, West Virginia. More details after the game."

Manny's girlfriend was Marlene, a plump, pleasant middle-aged woman I had grown fond of. She was innocent in all of

this, and didn't deserve to die.

As an overwhelming sense of loss descended upon me, I started shaking uncontrollably. The four goons were staring at me, making it worse.

"Such sad news, for a boxing fan like you, isn't it?" Ross said mockingly.

"You motherfucker, I'm gonna kill you," I told him, as Ross's phone rang.

"Hold that thought," Ross said and lifted a finger, while he pressed his cell phone to his ear.

"Are we all set?" He paused to listen. "OK, good. Go ahead," he said to the caller. Then he turned to me.

"It's for you, Marvin."

I looked at him, wondering what could go wrong next.

He handed me the phone. I took it with great dread. Put the speaker to my ear.

"Marvin, I'm sorry." It was Andrea. "They were waiting for me as soon as you walked away. I'm so sorry."

If Levin represented everything I hated in this world—greed, violence, corruption, and arrogance—then Andrea stood for everything I loved. She was soft and tender and beautiful and innocent. She was a twenty-one-year-old undergraduate from the University of Kentucky whom I had met about a week ago. She had driven hundreds of miles in the middle of the night just to help me when I had no one else. She had bathed me, bandaged me, and bedded me. Andrea and I had an unusual bond that was at once spiritual, physical, and historical. She hailed from my home town Leesburg, Illinois, having been raised in the environs of my own tragic youth. Her mother had once befriended me, when I needed it most. Now Andrea had done the same. And much more. She gave me hope, a rare commodity for a fuck-up like me.

Where I saw only failure, Andrea saw a hero. She recognized something redeemable in me, where I only recognized miscarriage. She found me attractive, when all I found in the