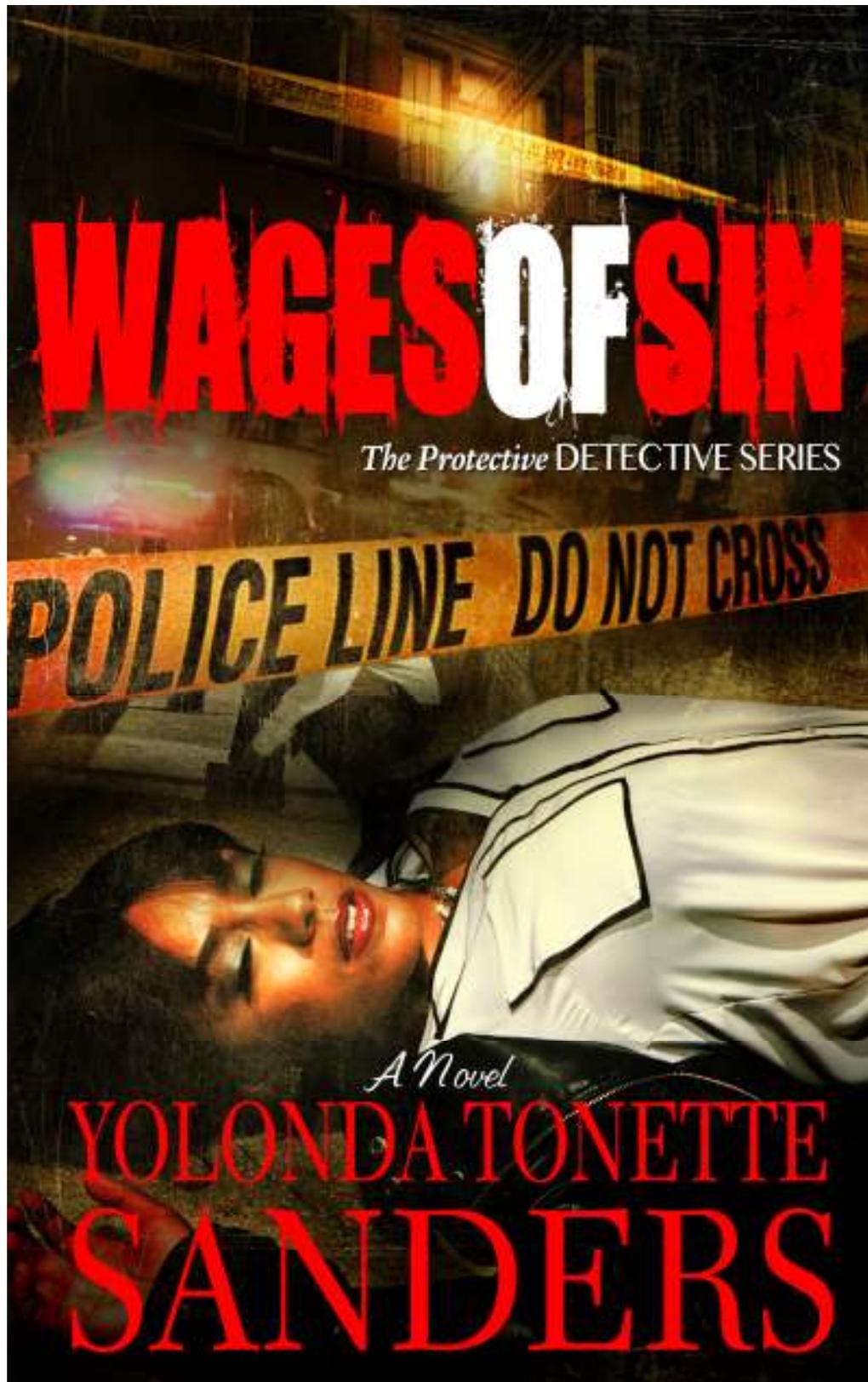


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## Prologue

“The Columbus Police are asking for your help in their search for a missing woman. Thirty-four-year-old Lolita Gordon was last seen yesterday morning when she dropped her son off at school. Workers became concerned when Mrs. Gordon failed to pick him up at the end of the day and called her husband who contacted the police. Her car was later found abandoned on 315 North not far from the Henderson Road exit with two flat tires. Investigators say that the tires appear to have been tampered with and there is further information not yet released to the public, which leads them to suspect foul play. If you have any information about the whereabouts of Lolita Gordon, please call the Columbus Police at 614-555-TIPS. You may remain anonymous.”

With an increasing heart rate from the day’s excitement, the Avenger cast a look to the woman sitting across the room on the floor. “I have information that could help solve this case. Do you think I should call?”

Bound and gagged, Lolita cried. Her muffled pleas remained unpersuasive.

The Avenger smiled, approaching Lolita and gently pulling loose strands of dark hair from her face. “Calm down, dear. Your cheeks are so red you’re starting to blend in with the furniture. I promise that they’ll find you after I’m done.”

Looking her directly in the eyes, the Avenger asked, “Do you know why I’ve chosen you, Lolita?”

She frantically shook her head no. Her eyes were sad and pitiful. What pretty eyes she had – a shade of emerald green that sparkled underneath the steady flow of tears. No wonder she was loved. Lolita’s eyes were mesmerizing. Anyone could be captivated by her stare. The Avenger quickly looked away. This divine assignment had already been initiated. No backing out now. Holding up two photographs, the Avenger delighted in watching Lolita’s expression turn from general fear to terror. Killing her was not only the righteous thing to do, it would also be fun.

## Chapter 1: Impeccable Timing

“Yeah...” Detective Troy Evans wasted no time answering his cell.

“Can you get down to the station ASAP? There’s a guy here who says that he has information about that missing lady and will only talk to the lead detective,” said one of the night duty officers.

“I’m on my way.” He tried getting out of bed without waking his wife, but she had heard the phone.

“What’s going on?”

Moonlight illuminated the room, shining directly onto Natalie as she sat up, suddenly alert. The satin sheet she held over her chest covered everything but Troy’s imagination. With memories of their last encounter only a few hours old, it took great restraint on his part to keep from sliding back into bed with her. “There’s a possible lead in Lolita Gordon’s case.”

“Is that the woman who disappeared last week?”

“Yep.”

“Bless her heart. I hope she’s okay.”

Troy wasn’t optimistic. It had been exactly six days since the Gordon girl disappeared. “I appreciate you wanting to see me out, but you stay in bed,” he said when Natalie began searching for her nightgown. “If I’m fortunate, maybe you’ll still be here when I get back so we can work on baby number two.”

Giving him a half-smile, she slipped on her gown, leaving the room and heading downstairs. To a casual observer, she would seem upset, but Troy understood her actions. She was praying, something she always did during these late night runs. Having been on the force for over eighteen years, he'd spent most of his time working homicides except for a temporary assignment a couple years back in sex crimes. The units in which he worked had no bearing on the amount of time he committed to his cases or his compassion for the victims, dead or alive. Troy didn't have a set shift. He was there whenever duty called and it summoned him now. Though there was no proof that Lolita Gordon was actually dead, there was something unsettling found in her car indicating that her life was in danger and Troy had been given the case due to those suspicious circumstances.

Once dressed, Troy peeked in on his son. The toddler slept like a log, not flinching a bit when the bright light burned in his face. Pictures of Spider-Man hung on the walls. He was Nate's favorite action hero. "See you later, li'l man," he whispered before heading down the stairs. With impeccable timing, Natalie handed him his thermal coffee cup when he got to the kitchen.

The early May humidity was turned up high and Troy really didn't want the coffee, despite the pleasing hazelnut aroma. He'd rather get his pick-me-up via an energy drink, but since Natalie had thought enough of him to make it, he graciously took it without complaint. "Thanks, babe," he said, quickly kissing her goodbye.

"You're welcome."

Troy scanned her from head to toe one last time. The short satin gown clung to her tall, light-skinned, and very shapely frame. Once an aspiring model, she could be a little high maintenance at times. Though she came short of ever truly breaking into the industry, her

measurements were superb, in his book, and well worth the attention he wanted to give them.

“Hopefully, I’ll see you soon,” he gave her another quick peck before heading to the garage.

“Don’t forget to lock up!”

## Chapter 2: Person of Interest

Troy had interviewed a lot of people over the years, but none as peculiar as Eric Freeman, who, at one o'clock in the morning, sat in the interrogation room, dressed in black pants with a long-sleeved white shirt and a red sweater vest that seemed at least a size too small. His hands were cupped under his chin. His eyes were closed and his lips were rapidly moving, but no sound came out—the first clue that this dude was extra special. “Eric Freeman, correct?”

“*Pastor* Eric Freeman.”

“Alrighty then. I’m Troy Evans, the lead detective on this case. How are you?”

Freeman responded, “Blessed and highly favored. I was communing with the Father about the soul of the young lady that prompted me to come here. The Lord has brought to my attention something pertinent.” That was clue number two.

“O-kay. Let’s get right to it, Eric. What is it that you know?”

“Detective Evans, I am a man of the cloth and I ask that you respect my calling. I happen to be the Pastor of The Tabernacle of Jesus, a church in Sandusky, and it offends me that you have overlooked my unique anointing.”

Clue three!

“I know for a fact that Mrs. Gordon is dead. You will find her body behind Saint Joseph Cathedral downtown.”

Scribbling down notes, Troy asked, “And how do you know this? Are you responsible for her death?”

“Absolutely not! I would rather not say how I came across the information, but it is true. Check it out for yourself and if I can be of further assistance, please let me know.”

Criminals always thought they were smarter than the cops. Freeman was arrogant to say the least, standing like Troy had taken up enough of his time. He was in no way as intimidating as he wanted to be—average height, average weight, and specks of gray that put him somewhere between Troy’s age of forty-one and fifty. Troy returned the cold stare Freeman gave without budging from his seat. “Sit down.”

Freeman folded his arms and then tapped his foot impatiently on the floor for several seconds before finally obeying. “Detective Evans, I have nothing else to add at this moment. I’ve told you everything that I know.”

“You will need to hang tight until we check this place out.”

“Am I a suspect?”

“If Mrs. Gordon’s body is where you have said —”

“It is.”

“Then you’re definitely a person of interest.”

“But, I didn’t kill her.”

“Then you’d better start writing a statement, detailing everything you know.”

§

The ride to Saint Joseph brought mixed emotions as Troy rushed to confirm or deny Freeman’s allegations. People made up stories to the police all the time. What would be Freeman’s motive? *Attention?* The way he emphasized his title had to be a result of some deep-

seated insecurity. *Pastor* Eric Freeman. Who cared? If this was some type of wild-goose chase, Eric would pay dearly.

Troy saw her as soon as he pulled into the lot. He cursed as he called in a 10-28, the homicide code for the CPD. Naked, Lolita's body had been positioned so that her legs were straight and her arms spread wide. Something had been placed on her chest. Troy kept his lights shining as he walked up to the body. It was a pocket-sized Bible splattered with blood. A single gunshot through her temple appeared to be the cause of death. Troy started taking pictures on his cell while waiting for the Crime Scene Investigation team to arrive.

Stretch marks testified to Lolita's claim to motherhood. A child was now left motherless, a husband now a widow. Troy couldn't help but think of how devastated he and Nate would be if something were to happen to Natalie. When CSI got there, he sent Natalie a text stating that he wouldn't be home any time soon, ending it with "*I luv u.*" Several minutes passed with no reply. Maybe she'd gone back to sleep. Hopefully she remembered to lock up.

"We found some footprints," said Paula J. Kyser, the lead CSI agent. Even in above-eighty-degree weather, the entire crew was in their usual wardrobe, covered from head to toe. "*A safety precaution,*" he'd been told many years ago. A lot of the officers referred to Paula as "Plain Jane" for her lack of physical bells and whistles. With limp, short auburn hair, a flat chest, and an even flatter butt, few guys took a second look her way, but everyone knew she had an unparalleled commitment to her job. A young widow, her husband had been robbed and killed seven years ago. Sam's murderer had never been brought to justice and Troy felt that was part of the reason Paula worked as hard as she did to help catch others.

"Hopefully, these footprints will match up to the suspect."

"Time will tell."

Knowing the scene and Lolita Gordon were safe in the hands of the CSI crew and coroner tech, Troy headed back to the station.

§

*“I was awakened about ten o’clock Wednesday night when my prayer partner called about a pressing matter. See, as a man of God, I believe it is important we have people in our lives that we can count on. The Bible, Proverbs 27:17 to be precise, says that ‘Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.’ Thus, my friend and I have become a source of iron for each other. After prayer was over, I was on my way into the kitchen to get a glass of water as I was a bit parched from being caught up in the Spirit and that’s when I saw it. A message on my wall, written by the Hand of God, that read, ‘My dearly beloved son, tell them that her body is at Saint Joseph Cathedral.’”*

“This dude can’t be for real,” Troy said to Jonathon Knight, his friend and fellow detective, as he continued to read through Freeman’s statement.

*“I realize how absurd this sounds. I was skeptical at first, but no one had been in the house all day except the Lord and me. I started to drive to Saint Joseph before coming into the station, but I decided to step out on faith. You know the Bible tells us that faith is important in our everyday lives and because I wanted to demonstrate to the All Mighty that I trust Him, I came straight here to report all that the Lord told me. I, Pastor Eric Joshua Freeman of The Tabernacle of Jesus church in Sandusky, Ohio, declare that everything written herein is true. In God I Trust, Pastor E. J. Freeman”*

“This is the most outrageous story I have ever heard!”

“Let’s put him on the box.” Knight’s voice had a rich, James Earl Jones sound. Some officers had nicknamed him “Danny DeVito” because of his height and round frame. Officers

could be cruel! To his knowledge, besides being playfully called a “country bumpkin” because of his faint southern accent, Troy had escaped unflattering nicknames. He was in excellent shape for his age and was what his wife described as “eye candy.” Jon was noticeably taller than DeVito. To Troy, he looked more like the Caucasian, slightly slimmer version of CeeLo Green. “Once he fails, that’ll give us an advantage.”

“Cool. We need to check him for gun powder residue as well. You handle crazy man while I talk more with the husband.”

In another room, Chad Gordon sat hunched over, bawling, not even bothering to lift his head when Troy entered. Troy waited a second. For a moment, Troy wished he’d traded places with Jon. It was hard enough to see a man cry, but seeing a thirty-four-year-old, six-three and two-hundred-something-pound man shamelessly wailing was an even bigger pill to swallow. His detective instinct said that Mr. Gordon was not involved, but Troy still had to ask him the tough questions. “Were you and your wife having marital problems? Can you think of any reason why someone would have wanted to kill her? What’s your affiliation with Saint Joseph Cathedral?”

Chad Gordon tearfully answered every one of the questions and, once he finished, started asking some of his own. “What am I going to tell our son? How can I raise him without her? Will you please find out who did this?”

“You are free to go,” Troy finally spoke up after a brief pause. No response from Chad, only more tears.

“I’m going to set my card on the table. Feel free to call me if you have any questions or think of anything else that can help us with your wife’s case.” Still nothing. “I’ll leave the door unlocked so you can go out when you’re ready. I’m sorry about your wife and please believe that we are working diligently on this case.”

“Thank you.” Chad lifted his head long enough to choke out those words. Troy backed out and let him be.

A week after the discovery of the Gordon girl’s body, Troy had taken Natalie out to dinner and a movie for her thirty-seventh birthday. Their time together was interrupted when Troy was again called to the station to meet Eric who revealed where the body of a local college student, Myesha Turner, could be found. She’d been abducted several days earlier from her dorm room. A dorm with nearly a thousand students and no one saw a thing! They found the killer’s same calling card in Myesha’s room that was in Lolita’s car, provoking a sickening feeling that a serial killer was on the loose.

The following weeks would replay like a bad nightmare with the disappearances of two other women on separate occasions. The third victim was a soccer mom, Amy Howard, who went missing one evening after she’d called 9-1-1 to report suspicions that someone was lurking outside her home. By the time officers got to the house to check things out, she was gone. The fourth was a physical therapy assistant, Michelle Rossi, who was in the middle of a patient visit when she went out to her car to get supplies and never returned.

Sadly, within six weeks of Lolita’s murder, late-night calls had become the norm as Myesha, Amy, and Michelle all met with Lolita’s same fate. Troy feared that an additional discovery would come soon since another woman, Sarah Matthews, was missing. The killer had managed to escape detection all this time. Though Eric Freeman remained at the top of Troy’s list of possible suspects, there was nothing concrete to tie him to any of the murders. He passed a lie detector test, had alibis during the times of the disappearances, tested negative for gun powder residue, and voluntarily allowed police to search his home which yielded no results, leaving Troy puzzled and frustrated. After the second victim was found, Troy knew that this case would take

over his life if the killer wasn't brought to justice soon. Now, in mid-June, four, perhaps five, victims later, every move he made revolved around this case, making it very difficult for him to balance work and family.

The department had held several press conferences within the past month to provide some answers to a demanding public that was on full alert. News reporters covered some aspect of the murders daily. The most perplexing thing for Troy was the fact that none of the victims had anything in common – different races, different ages, and different stages of life. The killer had been their only connection. They had all been kept alive between three and seven days; all had been stripped naked, but with no evidence of sexual assault; all had been found with a single gunshot wound in the head; and all discoveries were “revealed” supernaturally by God to one Eric Freeman within forty-eight hours of their deaths.

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