



EVIL
HIDES
IN
MANY
PLACES

THE PROPHET

ETHAN CROSS

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About the Book

OLD ENEMIES

Francis Ackerman is America's most terrifying serial killer. Brutal and cunning, he is ready to take his evil games to a new level.

NEW THREATS

Special Agent Marcus Williams cannot shake Ackerman from his mind. Yet now he must focus on catching the Anarchist, a new killer who abducts women before burning them alive.

HIDDEN TERRORS

The Anarchist will strike again soon. And Ackerman is still free. But even worse than this is a mysterious figure, unknown to the authorities - and his plans are more terrible than anyone imagines.

About the Author

When a fireman or a policeman would visit his school, most of his classmates' heads would swim with aspirations of growing up and catching bad guys or saving someone from a blazing inferno. When these moments came for Ethan Cross, however, his dreams weren't to someday be a cop or put out fires; he just wanted to write about it.

Now his dream of telling stories on a grand scale has come to fruition with the release of his new thrillers featuring Marcus Williams and Francis Ackerman Jr.

Ethan Cross lives in Illinois with his wife and two daughters. *The Prophet* is his second novel.

Also by Ethan Cross

The Shepherd

The Cage

The Prophet

Ethan Cross



arrow books

To my beautiful wife, Gina, for walking ten miles with me
through a Chicago snowstorm . . .

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1

FRANCIS ACKERMAN JR. stared out the window of the dark copper and white bungalow on Macarthur Boulevard. Across the street, a green sign with yellow letters read *Mosswood Playground - Oakland Recreation Department*. Children laughed and played while mothers and fathers pushed swings and sat on benches reading paperback novels or fiddling with cell phones. He had never experienced such things as a child. The only games his father had ever played were the kind that scarred the body and soul. The young Ackerman had never been nurtured; he had never been loved. But he had come to accept that. He had found purpose and meaning born from the pain and chaos that had consumed his life.

He watched the sun reflect off all the smiling faces and imagined how different the scene would be if the sun suddenly burned out and fell from the heavens. The cleansing cold of an everlasting winter would sweep across the land, sterilizing it, purifying it. He pictured the faces forever etched in torment, their screams silent, and their eyes like crystal balls reflecting what lay beyond death.

He let out a long sigh. It would be beautiful. He wondered if normal people ever thought of such things. He wondered if they ever found beauty in death.

Ackerman turned back to the three people bound to chairs in the room behind him. The first two were men—plain-clothes cops that had been watching the house. The older officer had a pencil-thin mustache and thinning brown hair while his younger counterpart's head was topped with a greasy mop of dark black. The younger man's bushy

eyebrows matched his hair, and a hooked nose sat above thin pink lips and a recessed chin. The first man struck Ackerman to be like any other cop he had met, honest and hard-working. But there was something about the younger man that he didn't like, something in his eyes. He suppressed the urge to smack the condescending little snarl from the younger cop's ferret-like face.

But, instead of hitting him, Ackerman just smiled at the cop. He needed a demonstration to get the information he wanted, and the ferret would be perfect. His eyes held the ferret's gaze a moment longer, and then he winked and turned to the last of his three captives.

Rosemary Phillips wore a faded Oakland Raiders sweatshirt. She had salt-and-pepper hair, and ancient pockmarks marred her smooth dark-chocolate complexion. Her eyes burned with a self-assurance and inner strength that Ackerman respected.

Unfortunately, he needed to find her grandson, and if necessary, he would kill all three of them to accomplish his goal.

He reached up to her mouth and pulled down the gag. She didn't scream. "Hello, Rosemary. I apologize that I didn't properly introduce myself earlier when I tied you up, but my name is Francis Ackerman Jr. Have you ever heard of me?"

Rosemary met his gaze. "I've seen you on television. You're the serial killer whose father experimented on him as a child, trying to prove that he could create a monster. I guess he succeeded. But I'm not afraid of you."

Ackerman smiled. "That's wonderful. It means that I can skip the introductions and get straight to the point. Do you know why I asked these two gentlemen to join us?"

Rosemary's head swiveled toward the two officers. Her gaze lingered on the ferret. Ackerman saw disgust in her eyes. Apparently, she didn't like him either. That would make things even more interesting once he started to torture the young cop.

“I’ve seen these two around,” she said. “I’ve already told the cops that my grandson ain’t no damn fool. He wouldn’t just show up here, and I haven’t heard from him since this mess started. But they wouldn’t listen. Apparently they think it’s a good idea to stake out an old lady’s house instead of being out there on the streets doing what the people of this city pay them to do. Typical government at work.”

Ackerman smiled. “I know exactly what you mean. I’ve never had much respect for authority. But, you see, I’m looking for your grandson as well. I, however, don’t have the time or patience to sit around here on the off chance that he might show up. I prefer the direct approach, and so I’m going to ask you to level with me. Where can I find your grandson?”

“Like I told them, I have no idea.”

He walked over to a tall mahogany hutch resting against the wall. It was old and well built. Family pictures lined its surface and shelves. He picked up a picture of a smiling young black man with his arm around Rosemary. A blue and gold birthday cake sat in front of them. “Rosemary, I’ve done my homework, and I’ve learned that your grandson thinks the world of you. You were his anchor in the storm. Maybe the one good thing in his life. The one person who loved him. You know where he’s hiding, and you are going to share that information with me. One way or another.”

“Why do you even care? What’s he to you?”

“He’s nothing to me. I could care less about your grandson. But someone that I do care about is looking for him, and I try to be useful where I can. And, like you said, sometimes bureaucracy and red tape are just too damn slow. We’re going to speed along the process.”

Rosemary shook her head and tugged on the ropes. “I don’t know where he is, and if I did, I’d never tell a monster like you.”

His father’s words tumbled through his mind.

You're a monster . . . Kill her and the pain will stop . . . No one will ever love you . . .

"Oh, my dear, words hurt. But you're right. I am a monster."

Ackerman grabbed a duffle bag from the floor and tossed it onto a small end table. As he unzipped the bag and rifled through the contents, he said, "Are you familiar with the Spanish Inquisition? I've been reading a lot about it lately. It's a fascinating period of history. The Inquisition was basically a tribunal established by the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile in order to maintain Catholic orthodoxy within their kingdoms, especially among the new converts from Judaism and Islam. But that's not what fascinates me. What fascinates me are the unspeakable acts of barbarism and torture that were carried out in the name of God upon those deemed to be heretics. We think that we live in a brutal age, but our memories are very short-sighted. Any true student of history can tell you that this is the age of enlightenment compared with other periods throughout time. The things the Inquisitors did to wrench confessions from their victims were nothing less than extraordinary. Those Inquisitors displayed fabulous imagination."

Ackerman brought a strange device up out of the duffle bag. "This is an antique. Its previous owner claimed that it's an exact replica of one used during the Inquisition. You've got to love eBay."

He held up the device—made from two large, spiked blocks of wood connected by two threaded metal rods an inch in diameter each—for their inspection. "This was referred to as the Knee Splitter. Although it was used on more than just knees. When the Inquisitor turned these screws, the two blocks would push closer together and the spikes would first pierce the flesh of the victim. Then the Inquisitor would continue to twist the screws tighter and

tighter until they received the answers they wanted or until the affected appendage was rendered useless.”

Rosemary spat at him. As she spoke, her words were strong and confident. He detected a slight hint of a Georgia accent and suspected that it was from her youth and only presented itself when she was especially flustered. “You’re going to kill us anyway. No matter what I do. I can’t save these men anymore than I can save myself. The only thing that I can control is the way that I go out. And I won’t grovel and beg to the likes of you. I won’t give you the satisfaction.”

Ackerman nodded. “I respect that. So many people blame the world or society or others for the way that they are. But we’re all victims of circumstance to a certain extent. We like to think that we’re in control of our own destinies, but the truth is that much of our lives is dictated by forces far beyond our control and comprehension. We all have our strings pulled by someone or something. It’s unavoidable. The only place that we have any real control is right here.” He tapped the tip of his fifteen-inch survival knife against his right temple. “Within our minds. Most people don’t understand that, but you do. I didn’t come here to kill you, Rosemary. It will give me no pleasure to remove you from the world. But my strings get pulled just like everyone else’s. In this case, circumstances dictate that I hurt you and these men in order to achieve my goal. I’m good at what I do, my dear. I’ve been schooled in pain and suffering my entire life. Time will only allow me to share a small portion of my expertise with you, but I can tell you that it will be enough. You will tell me. That’s beyond your control. The only aspect of this situation that you can influence is the duration of the suffering you must endure. So I’ll ask again: where is your grandson?”

Her lips trembled, but she didn’t speak.

The smell of cinnamon permeated the air but was unable to mask a feral aroma of sweat and fear. Ackerman had

missed that smell. He had missed the fear, the power. But he needed to keep his excitement contained. He couldn't lose control. This was about information, not about satisfying his own hunger.

"Time to begin. As they say, I'm going to put the screws to this officer. Makes you wonder if this device is responsible for such a saying, doesn't it?"

~~*~~

After several moments of playing with his new toy, Ackerman looked at Rosemary, but she had diverted her gaze. He twisted the handles again, and the officer's thrashing increased.

"Okay, I'll tell you!" she said. "He's in Spokane, Washington. They're set up in an abandoned metal-working shop of some kind. Some crooked realtor set it up for them. I've tried to get him to turn himself in. I even considered calling the police myself, but I know that he and his friends won't allow themselves to be captured alive. He's the only family I have left." Tears ran down her cheeks.

Ackerman reached down to relieve the pressure on the officer's legs. The man's head fell back against the chair. "Thank you. I believe you, and I appreciate your situation. Your grandson has been a bad boy. But he's your flesh and blood, and you still love him."

He walked over to the table and pulled up another chair in front of Rosemary. As he sat, he pulled out a small notepad. It was spiral-bound from the top and had a blood-red cover. "Since you've been so forthcoming with me, and out of respect, I'll give you a genuine chance to save your lives." He flipped up the notepad's cover, retrieved a small pen from within the spiral, and started to write. As the pen traveled over the page, he said, "I'm going to let you pick the outcome of our little game. On this first sheet, I've written 'ferret' to represent our first officer." He tore off the

page, wadded it up, and placed it between his legs. "On the second, we'll write 'Jackie Gleason' to represent the next officer. Then 'Rosemary'. Then 'all live'. And 'all die'."

He mixed up the wadded pieces of paper and placed them on the floor in front of her. "I think the game is self-explanatory. But to make sure that there's no confusion, you pick the piece of paper, and I kill whoever's name is on it. But you do have a twenty percent chance that you all live. And just to be clear, if you refuse to pick or take too long, I'll be happy to kill all three of you. So please don't try to fight fate. The only thing you have control over here is which piece of paper you choose. Have no illusions that you have any other options. It will only serve to make the situation even less manageable for you. Pick one."

Rosemary's eyes were full of hate. They burrowed into him. Her gaze didn't waver. A doctor named Kendrick from the Cedar Mill Psychiatric Hospital had once told Ackerman that he had damage to a group of interconnected brain structures, known as the paralimbic system, that were involved in processing emotion, goal-seeking, motivation, and self-control. The doctor had studied his brain using functional magnetic resonance imaging technology and had also found damage to an area known as the amygdala that generated emotions such as fear. Monkeys in the wild with damage to the amygdala had been known to walk right up to people or even predators. The doctor had said this explained why Ackerman didn't feel fear in the way that other people did. He wondered if Rosemary had a similar impairment or if her strength originated from somewhere else entirely.

She looked down at the pieces of paper, then back into his eyes. "Third one. The one right in the center."

He reached down and uncrumpled the small piece of paper. He smiled. "It's your lucky day. You all get to live. I'm sorry that you had to endure this due to the actions of

someone else. But, as I said, we're all victims of circumstance."

Then he stood, retrieved his things, and exited onto Macarthur Boulevard.

~~*~~

Ackerman tossed his duffle bag into the trunk of a light-blue Ford Focus. He wished he could travel in more style, but the ability to blend in outweighed his own sense of flare. He pulled open the driver's door, slipped inside, and dropped some jewelry and the wallets and purse of his former captives on the seat next to him. He hated to lower himself to common thievery, but everything cost money. And his skill set didn't exactly look good on a résumé. Besides, he didn't have time for such things.

He retrieved a disposable cell phone from the glove box and activated the device. As he dialed and pressed send, he looked down at the small slip of paper that Rosemary had chosen. The words *All Die* stared back at him.

After a few rings, the call connected, and the voice on the other end said, "What do you want?"

Ackerman smiled. "Hello, Marcus. Please forgive me, for I have sinned. But I do it all for you."

2

MARCUS WILLIAMS STARED down at the brutalized body of a dead woman and could tell by the bruising and ligature marks that she had been raped before being murdered. The small maintenance office connected to the back of the factory was in general disrepair. The plaster had crumbled from water damage, and the roof was bare in several spots, exposing a clear night sky. Snow had fallen through the gaps, and a light dusting of it covered everything. A large section of shelving attached to the back wall had broken free from its mounts. Its former contents littered the floor—rusted pipe fittings, bailing wire, half-dissolved cardboard boxes, old equipment manuals. The body had been discarded like just another piece of junk intended to be disposed of more thoroughly at a later time. Judging by the body's lividity and rigor, Marcus suspected that she'd been dead only a few hours and had been killed using some small, blunt object like a hammer. If only he had arrived just a little sooner . . .

He pushed the anger and guilt from his mind. It did him no good now. Stepping through the exterior entrance of the office, he pushed the door shut and wedged a rock against it to keep it from swinging back open. The door had been padlocked, and he had popped it using a Hallaghan Tool, a device similar to a crowbar used for breaching and entries. He didn't want the door to catch in the wind and slam against the frame. He wanted to maintain the element of surprise.

He crossed the parking lot, scaled a chain-link fence, and dropped onto the sidewalk. There were other, newer factories nearby, but this business had gone bankrupt and

abandoned its facility. The Bank Crew had been paying the realtor under the table for access to the crumbling brick structure. It hadn't taken much convincing to obtain the information from the operator of the realty office. He had crumbled like a house of cards at the mention of lawyers and prison sentences for aiding and abetting.

Marcus had been tracking the Bank Crew for several weeks now, but they had gone underground after their last job. Then, two days ago, they had struck again, taking the wife and two daughters of a jewelry-store owner. The Bank Crew, as the press had come to call them, had worked out a violent money-making scheme whereby they kidnapped the family of someone with access to a great deal of cash or valuable assets. Then they would force the person to bring them the money by threatening to kill the family. It was a pretty straightforward extortion-and-ransom gambit, but the thing that set the Crew apart was their brutal nature. Their victims almost always complied, but they killed them anyway. First, they killed the father once they had the money. Then they had some fun with the female members of the family before ending their lives as well.

The police knew that the group had four members, but they had been pretty good so far at leaving behind little evidence. The only piece of useful information came from a fingerprint left at one of the scenes. The man's name popped up in the system, but no one had seen or heard from him since the Crew had started up. The cops in Oakland who had questioned his grandmother believed that she knew more than she was telling them, but they couldn't do anything more than stake out her place.

Marcus had planned to pay her a visit himself, but Ackerman had beaten him to it.

Jerking open the door to the black GMC Yukon, he dropped in behind the wheel, pressed the button to activate the heated seats, and blew into his hands. After a moment, the passenger-side door opened as well, and Andrew Garrison

pulled himself inside. Andrew ripped a stocking cap from his head, revealing short sandy-blond hair. Unlike Marcus, whose face was covered by three days of dark beard growth, Andrew had a clean-cut and well-kept appearance.

"Anything?" Marcus said.

"Yeah, I think I found the room where they're keeping the daughters and saw at least one of the Crew passed out on a futon in the main building. It looks like they've brought in a folding table and a couple pieces of furniture to make some kind of makeshift living area. They've covered up the windows of the front offices, and I was afraid I'd make too much noise breaking in there. How about you?"

"I found the mother."

Andrew seemed to be waiting for more of an explanation, but after a moment's silence, none was needed. Andrew looked through the front windshield and said, "Dammit. How do you want to play it?"

"We go in the back. Standard tether formation, me in the front and you in the rear. We work our way through the building." Marcus sighed. "I'm going to call it in."

He pulled a cell phone from his pocket and dialed. The Director of the Shepherd Organization answered with no preamble after the first ring. "Did you find them?"

"Yeah. The mother's dead. We're ready to breach."

"Okay, the council's convened and have granted you full authority to move forward with this operation. Be careful and Godspeed." The Director clicked off without another word.

Marcus laid down the phone and stared out at the snow. He had been a Shepherd for over a year now, and he still wasn't sure if he'd made the right decision. The Shepherd Organization operated out of the Department of Justice under the guise of a think-tank and consulting agency specializing in violent offenders, mostly serial killers. But their primary mandate separated them from other law-enforcement agencies like the FBI's Behavioral Analysis

Unit. They weren't charged with simply capturing and convicting killers. Their goal was to get them off the streets in any way possible, and they usually bent or outright broke any law necessary to do so. They had been designed as a no-holds-barred task force that could bypass all the red tape and get the job done without worrying about evidence and due process. It wasn't all that different from operations that the CIA and military had been conducting for years, eliminating hostile targets overseas. The difference being that the Shepherd Organization carried out its activities on US soil and against US citizens.

The organization consisted of small cell groups, and Marcus had been recruited to head one of the teams due to certain talents he had displayed during his time as a homicide detective with the NYPD. While on the force, he had shown great promise and deductive aptitude, but he had also thrown away his future by choosing not to look the other way. A wealthy senator from a powerful family had a penchant for abusing and murdering young girls, and Marcus had refused to let him get away with it. Instead, he had put a bullet in the senator's brain and had only avoided prosecution so that the senator's dark deeds would not see the light of day.

Marcus had operational command of his unit but reported to a man he knew only as the Director and some council of faceless men or women whose existence he couldn't even verify.

"What's wrong?" Andrew said.

"Other than the current Attorney General and the Director, have you ever met anyone high up the chain of command? Any members of the council?"

"Why the sudden interest?"

"It's not a sudden interest. It's a nagging suspicion. Haven't you ever wondered about how we get away with the things we do? Or who's pulling the strings?"

Andrew shrugged. "Sure. But I believe in what we do. I think the world's a better place with us on the streets. So I try to focus on that. Keep my mind on the things that I have control over."

"You really think what we do is right?"

"We save people's lives, protect the average Joe from monsters that he doesn't even want to know exist. What can be wrong about that?"

"Gandhi said, 'I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent.'"

Andrew laughed. "How do you think Gandhi would feel if that was one of his loved ones lying dead in there? A lot of people in this world would say that we're every bit as bad as the men we hunt. They'd say that we violate these men's human rights. But those people have also never had to put their own kid in the ground after their baby girl's life was stolen by a man just like the ones in that building. They can't say how they'd feel then. Until you're in that position, you can never understand the depth of what we do. You think Gandhi ever met a man like Ackerman?"

Andrew looked away and leaned back against the seat.

Marcus reached up and rubbed his temples. The migraines had been getting steadily worse, and he barely slept fifteen hours in a good week. He couldn't go on like this, and the situation with Ackerman didn't help matters. The killer had been used in Marcus's recruitment to show him the true face of the type of men that the Shepherd Organization hunted. But the demonstration had backfired. The killer escaped and became convinced that his and Marcus's destinies were linked. Ackerman's fixation on him resulted in frequent calls and unwanted attempts at helping with active investigations. But the worst part was that Marcus and the other members of his team had no idea how Ackerman even knew what case they were investigating or how the killer

had learned his number. All attempts at finding and tracking Ackerman had turned up nothing.

Andrew said, "Maybe we should thank Ackerman. He did find the Bank Crew for us. He may end up saving the lives of those two girls."

Marcus's arm shot out and he grabbed a fistful of Andrew's coat. He jerked him up and off the seat, pulling him in close. "And he tortured two cops and an old woman in the process! It's only a matter of time before he starts killing again. If he isn't already. But I suppose that's okay as long as the ends justify the means, right?"

He shoved Andrew back against his seat and looked toward the abandoned factory. Silence stretched within the vehicle.

"We'll get him, Marcus."

"Whatever."

Andrew was silent for a moment more and then added, "If things go south in there and the cops show up, remember to let me do the talking."

Marcus cocked his head to the side and said, "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm just saying that, you know, you're not much of a people person."

"A people person? What is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, it's what's known as a euphemism or a nice way of saying that you're a bit of an asshole."

"Thanks. I'm so lucky to have you as my wingman."

Andrew raised his hands in surrender. "I just call it the way I see it."

Marcus ignored the comment and tried to prepare his mind for what they were about to do. Pole lights surrounded the structure, illuminating most of the exterior. The building was white block with a metal roof. It was in need of a coat of paint and a pole jutted up in front of the offices, but the sign on top had been removed. It looked like any other

nondescript building within the industrial park, only it had been sitting empty for years.

“You wearing your vest?”

“Of course. I sleep with the damn thing,” Andrew replied.

Marcus took a deep breath, cocked his head to the side, cracked his neck, and then threw open his door. “We’ve got work to do.”

~~*~~

Marcus entered first, leading the way with a silenced 9mm Sig Sauer P226 Tactical Operations pistol gripped in his hand. Andrew followed close behind with a Glock in his right hand and his left touching Marcus’s back. They moved forward in tandem as if they were connected by a tether. It allowed them to cover all angles. In a space like this one, with big open rooms and several points of ingress, they needed to monitor their backs as much as their fronts. And the bottom line was that no matter how cautious or well trained they were, a man with a little luck and a handful of bullets could end their lives as easily as they could his.

The back of the warehouse opened into a pale green hallway with two wood-grain hollow-core doors on the right and one on the left. Then the corridor came to a door in front and an intersection that veered off to the right. They had acquired a floor plan from the realtor’s office, and through a window, Andrew had glimpsed one of the girls being taken to the large office on their left-hand side.

The girls’ names were Paula and Kristy, their ages sixteen and twelve.

Marcus nodded toward the right door. They took up positions along each side of the entryway with Andrew monitoring the rest of the corridor. Marcus twisted the knob and gave the door a gentle push. Using a law enforcement technique known as “pieing”, he used the door frame as a pivot and kept himself positioned so that anyone in the