

THE LAST WORD

SYNOPSIS

A woman on death row for murdering the police officer who molested and murdered her daughter, is visited by the prison chaplain before she is put to death.

CHARACTERS

TINA CALDWELL – Early 40s, on death row. Unrepentant, fractured beyond repair.

REVEREND THOMAS REED – Early 60s, a Minister. Earnest, conflicted, compassionate.

GUARD– 30s or older, either gender

SETTING

A death row visiting room. Metal table. Two bolted chairs.

(Lights up. TINA sits alone, hands cuffed and on the table. She stares straight ahead. A GUARD opens a door. REVEREND THOMAS enters carrying a small Bible. The door shuts. Silence.)

REVEREND THOMAS

Tina Caldwell?

(TINA doesn't look at him.)

TINA

You're late.

REVEREND THOMAS

I'm sorry. They held me at the gate.

(REVEREND THOMAS sits, holding his Bible.)

REVEREND THOMAS

I'm Reverend Thomas Reed. I've been asked to—

TINA

—to make me say I'm sorry so I can die clean....You can say it. That's why you're here.

REVEREND THOMAS

I'm here because you asked for spiritual counsel.

TINA

I asked to see someone who actually believes in God. Big difference.

THE LAST WORD

REVEREND THOMAS

I've been assigned to assist you.

TINA

Assigned? I guess even God files paperwork...You look tired.

REVEREND THOMAS

So do you.

TINA

I sleep plenty. It's waking up that hurts.

(REVEREND THOMAS sets his Bible on the table.)

REVEREND THOMAS

I won't pretend to understand your suffering. I won't force anything. I can listen. I can pray. If you want confession—

TINA

—I don't. I want you to understand why I won't.

REVEREND THOMAS

But, you asked for the chaplain.

TINA

I asked for a witness.

REVEREND THOMAS

Then I'm listening.

TINA

They say I should confess my sin. That I should empty myself out so God can forgive me.

REVEREND THOMAS

Confession isn't emptying. It's naming.

TINA

Then name this...I am not sorry I killed him.

REVEREND THOMAS

Are you sorry he's dead?

TINA

No.

THE LAST WORD

REVEREND THOMAS

Are you sorry for the violence?

TINA

No.

REVEREND THOMAS

Are you sorry for what it's done to you?

TINA

What it's done to me? You have no idea what's it's done to me.

REVEREND THOMAS

Do you want to talk about Detective Burch?

TINA

His name doesn't deserve to be spoken. Don't you ever speak that name to me... My daughter's name was Lily. She loved astronomy. She used to say that the stars were "holes where Heaven leaks through and God watches over us."

REVEREND THOMAS

That's a beautiful way to look at it.

TINA

So, where was God? Tell me. He was supposed to protect her... Just like that badge is supposed to protect the innocent. Everything I know is a lie.

REVEREND THOMAS

I can understand why you may feel that way. I've read the case file.

TINA

Then you read lies and how they "lost" evidence. How they contaminated samples. How they coached witnesses. Every mistake that helped him walk while my baby laid in the morgue!...You know, when the judge said "dismissed," he SMILED at me. He smiled! Like he'd won.

REVEREND THOMAS

Tina—

TINA

Don't say my name like that. Not like you're trying to save me.

THE LAST WORD

REVEREND THOMAS

So, tell me. What did killing him give you?

TINA

Peace... For one night, I slept without hearing her cry...That's what no one understands. It wasn't RAGE. It was clarity.

REVEREND THOMAS

And afterward?

TINA

Afterward I became useful. They listened then. They used my case to finally admit what he was. Serial. Predator. It took his death to reveal to the world what he really was. The evidence was all right there. Boxes of trophies. All those poor children and families. They finally got justice.

REVEREND THOMAS

Justice belongs to God.

TINA

Maybe He subcontracted.

REVEREND THOMAS

The Church cannot absolve an unrepentant heart.

TINA

I know the rules. I am asking if God understands why I couldn't stop myself. Because I tried. I tried the courts. I tried the police. I tried prayer. I knelt until my knees were black and blue. I begged God for a sign. Anything...NOTHING CAME!...So I became the sign.

REVEREND THOMAS

If everyone took justice into their own hands—

TINA

—don't finish that sentence. Because everyone doesn't lose their child like that...If I say I'm sorry, It's like saying he deserved mercy more than she deserved safety...I won't do that to her.

REVEREND THOMAS

What if repentance isn't about denying your love— but surrendering your certainty?

TINA

Certainty is all I have left...Tell me the truth. Would you have

THE LAST WORD

told him he is forgiven? If he was sitting where I am now...Would you have told him that God loved him?

REVEREND THOMAS

Yes.

TINA

Then God can hear this too. I loved her more than He did. He showed no mercy here.

REVEREND THOMAS

Tina... mercy is not approval.

TINA

Then let God show it to me without my apology!

(A long silence.)

REVEREND THOMAS

May I pray? Not confession. Not absolution.

TINA

Why bother? It won't help me anymore.

REVEREND THOMAS

You don't know that. None of us do.

TINA

Oh, I do.

REVEREND THOMAS

It is up to God.

TINA

An unrepentant soul is doomed to be damned to hell for all eternity, right? That's what the Bible says. So, that is my fate. Hell on Earth and then hell forever more. But that only leaves me torn on one thing.

REVEREND THOMAS

What is that?

TINA

If I was actually sorry, God could forgive me- and I could see my little girl again. Instead, I will probably see him again, go where I sent him- where I can't escape and it just isn't right. How can God be so cruel?

THE LAST WORD

REVEREND THOMAS

We are not always meant to understand His ways.

TINA

His ways? He let them cover up evidence. Let him get away with it all!

REVEREND THOMAS

You don't have to relive it—

TINA

Yes. I do. That's the sentence I'm already serving! While he had no sentencing... I couldn't believe it when that judge said "Case dismissed."...Dismissed like my little girl's life meant nothing.

REVEREND THOMAS

Tina—

TINA

Don't. You know he kept hurting children. After. And they knew. They whispered it in hallways and church basements and kitchens at night. But no one stopped him...So I did.

REVEREND THOMAS

You took a life.

TINA

I ended a MONSTER!

REVEREND THOMAS

The Church teaches that no one is beyond redemption. That mercy—

TINA

MERCY?! Please stop using that word. Where was God's mercy when my daughter screamed? As he did all those evil things to her. When he threw her away with the garbage?

REVEREND THOMAS

Evil exists because we have free will.

TINA

Then don't ask me to be sorry for using mine.

REVEREND THOMAS

Absolution requires repentance.

THE LAST WORD

TINA

I know the rules. I just won't lie to God. Besides, He knows the truth anyway.

(TINA looks at the Bible.)

TINA

I replay it every night. The way he laughed when I said her name. The way he thought the badge would save him again. That I wouldn't have the guts to pull that trigger. All smug until that brief second before I pulled the trigger. The revelation in his eyes that split second before the bullet hit his head...I can still see her roller skates by the door. I hear her calling for me when I'm already awake. If I say I'm sorry.....I erase her.

REVEREND THOMAS

You can be sorry for how you acted, without being sorry why.

TINA

No. Because how is why. Because I'd do it again! THAT'S my sin. Certainty.

REVEREND THOMAS

What do you want from me, Tina?

TINA

Tell me God understands rage. Did He feel it when his Son hung on that cross? Tell me He can hold a mother who couldn't save her child. Tell me He doesn't need me to apologize to let me in. Tell me I can see her again. Tell me that hell doesn't have to continue after I leave this one.

REVEREND THOMAS

I can't change doctrine.

TINA

Then there is really nothing more to say.

REVEREND THOMAS

But I believe God weeps with you. I believe Christ stands with the broken and the furious. And I believe...I believe mercy is bigger than our words for it.

TINA

But, you can't make it make sense.

THE LAST WORD

REVEREND THOMAS

Will you pray with me? Not a confession. Just... prayer.

(TINA nods faintly. REVEREND THOMAS holds her hands as he bows his head.)

REVEREND THOMAS

God of justice and sorrow, hold this mother. Hold her child. Hold the truth that no court could keep. Receive what we cannot fix.

(The GUARD knocks and enters.)

GUARD

It's time.

(REVEREND THOMAS stands.)

REVEREND THOMAS

Is there anything else I can do for you?

TINA

Will you be there? Watching in the room behind the glass?

REVEREND THOMAS

If you want me to be.

TINA

That would nice. Truth is, I'm not scared to die... It's easier than living like this.

REVEREND THOMAS

May God be with you, child.

(REVEREND THOMAS exits.)

TINA

Amen.

(TINA begins sobbing and the GUARD leads her out of the room.)

(Lights down.)