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Killer Instinct

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"When the student is ready, the Master appears."
—Buddhist proverb

PROLOGUE

I'd never fired a gun before.

In fact, before this evening, I'd never even held one.

It was a Colt .45 semiautomatic pistol, and it felt heavy and awkward in my hand. Its grip was rough. I couldn't steady the weapon. Still, I was close enough to him now to put a bullet in the center of his chest. If I didn't — if I didn't kill him now — there was no question he'd kill me. I was no match for him, and we both knew it.

It was the middle of the night, and we were the only ones on the twentieth floor, probably in the entire building. Outside my office the maze of cubicles was dark. All those people who worked with me and for me, I'd probably never see again.

My hand was trembling, but I squeezed the trigger.

Just a few days ago, if you looked at me you'd see a successful corporate executive. A guy with a high-powered job married to a beautiful woman. A man for whom everything seemed to be going

perfectly.

My idea of danger had been going to bed without brushing my teeth.

Now I didn't think I was going to live to see the morning.

So where did I go wrong? How far back did it go? First grade, when I hit that kid Sean Herlihy with a snowball? Fourth grade, when I was picked third to last for the kickball team?

No, I can tell you exactly when it began.

It was five months ago.

PART ONE

1.

Okay, so I'm an idiot.

The Acura went into a ditch because I was trying to do too many things at once. Radiohead's "The Bends" was playing, loud, while I was driving home, too fast, since I was late as usual. Left hand on the wheel, while with my right hand I was thumbing my BlackBerry for e-mails, hoping I'd finally nailed a deal with a huge new customer. Most of the e-mails were blowback from the departure of our divisional vice president, Crawford, who'd just jumped ship to Sony. Then my cell phone rang. I dropped the BlackBerry on the car seat and grabbed the cell.

I knew from the ring that it was my wife, Kate, so I didn't bother to turn down the music — I figured she was just calling to find out when I'd be home from work so she could get dinner ready. She'd been on a tofu kick the last few months — tofu and brown rice and kale, stuff like that. It had to be really good for you, since it tasted so bad. But I'd never tell her so.

That wasn't why she was calling, though. I could tell right away from Kate's voice that she'd been crying, and even before she said anything I knew why.

"DiMarco called," she said. DiMarco was our doctor at Boston IVF who'd been trying to get Kate pregnant for the last two years or so. I didn't have high hopes, plus I didn't personally know anyone who'd ever made a baby in a test tube, so I was dubious about the whole process. I figured high-tech should be for flat-screen plasma monitors, not making

babies. Even so, it felt like I'd been punched in the stomach.

But the worst thing was what it would do to Kate. She was crazy enough these days from the hormone injections. This would send her over the edge.

"I'm really sorry," I said.

"They're not going to let us keep trying forever, you know," she said. "All they care about is their numbers, and we're bringing them down."

"Katie, it's only our third try with the IVF stuff. It's like a ten percent chance or something per cycle anyway, right? We'll keep at it, babe. That's all."

"The point is, what are we going to do if this doesn't work?" Kate's voice got all high and choked, made my heart squeeze. "Go to California, do the donor egg thing? I can't go through that. Adopt? Jason, I can barely hear you."

Adoption was fine with me. Or not. But I'm not totally clueless, so instead I focused on turning down the music. There's some little button on the steering wheel that I've never figured out how to use, so with the thumb of my driving hand I started pushing buttons, but instead the volume increased until Radiohead was blaring.

"Kate," I said, but just then I realized that the car had veered onto the shoulder and then off the road. I dropped the phone, grabbed the wheel with both hands, cut it hard, but too late.

There was a loud ka-chunk. I spun the steering wheel, slammed on the brakes.

A sickening metallic crunch. I was jolted forward, thrown against the wheel, then backwards. Suddenly the car was canting all the way down to one side. The engine was racing, the wheels spinning in midair.

I knew right away I wasn't hurt seriously, but I might have bruised a couple of ribs slightly. It's funny: I immediately started thinking of those old black-and-white driver-ed shock movies they used to show in the fifties and sixties with lurid titles like "The Last Prom" and "Mechanized Death," from the days when all cops had crew cuts and

wore huge-brimmed Canadian Mountie hats. A guy in my college frat had a videotape of these educational snuff flicks. Watching them could scare the bejeezus out of you. I couldn't believe anyone learning to drive back then could see "The Last Prom" and still be willing to get behind the wheel.

I turned the key, shut off the music, and sat there for a couple of seconds in silence before I picked the cell phone off the floor of the car to call Triple A.

But the line was still open, and I could hear Kate screaming.

"Hey," I said.

"Jason, are you all right?" She was freaking out. "What happened?"

"I'm fine, babe."

"Jason, my God, did you get in an accident?"

"Don't worry about it, sweetheart. I'm totally — I'm fine. Everything's cool. Don't worry about it."

Forty-five minutes later a tow truck pulled up a bright red truck, M.E. WALSH TOW painted on the side panel. The driver walked over to me, holding a metal clipboard. He was a tall, broad-shouldered guy with a scruffy goatee, wearing a bandana on his head knotted at the back and long gray-flecked brown hair in a kind of mullet. He was wearing a black leather Harley Davidson jacket.

"Well, that sucks," the dude said.

"Thanks for coming," I said.

"No worries," Harley said. "Let me guess. You were talking on your cell phone."

I blinked, hesitated for a microsecond before I said sheepishly, "Yeah."

"Damn things are a menace."

"Yeah, totally," I said. Like I could survive without my cell phone. But he didn't exactly seem to be a cell phone kind of guy. He drove a tow truck and a motorcycle. Probably had a CB radio in there along with his Red Man chewing tobacco and his Allman Brothers CDs. And a roll

of toilet paper in the glove compartment. Kind of guy who mows his lawn and finds a car. Who thinks the last four words of the national anthem are "Gentlemen, start your engines."

"You okay?" he said.

"Yeah, I'm good."

He backed the truck around to my car, lowered the bed, hooked the winch up to the Acura. He switched on the electric pulley thing and started hauling my car out of the ditch. Fortunately, we were on a fairly deserted stretch of road — I always take this shortcut from the office in Framingham to the Mass Pike — so there weren't too many cars whizzing by. I noticed the truck had a yellow "Support the Troops" ribbon sticker on one side and one of those black-and-white POW/MIA stickers on the windshield. I made a mental note to myself not to criticize the war in Iraq unless I wanted to get my larynx crushed by the guy's bare hands.

"Climb in," he said.

The cab of the truck smelled like stale cigar smoke and gasoline. A Special Forces decal on the dashboard. I was starting to get real warm and fuzzy feelings about the war.

"You got a body shop you like?" he said. I could barely hear him over the hydraulic whine of the truck bed mechanism.

I had a serious gearhead friend who'd know, but I couldn't tell a carburetor from a caribou. "I don't get into accidents too often," I said.

"Well, you don't look like the kinda guy gets under the hood and changes the oil himself," Harley said. "There's a body shop I know," he said. "Not too far from here. We're good to go."

We mostly sat there in silence while he drove. I made a couple of attempts to get a conversation started with Harley, but it was like striking a wet match.

Normally I could talk to anyone about anything — you name it, sports, kids, dogs, TV shows, whatever. I was a sales manager for one of the biggest electronics companies in the world, up there with Sony and Panasonic. The division I work for makes those big beautiful flat-screen

LCD and plasma TVs and monitors that so many people lust after. Very cool products. And I've found that the really good sales reps, the ones who have the juice, can start a conversation with anybody. That's me.

But this guy didn't want to talk, and after a while I gave up. I was kind of uncomfortable sitting there in the front seat of a tow truck being chauffeured around by a Hell's Angel, me in my expensive charcoal suit, trying to avoid the chewing gum, or tar, or whatever the hell it was stuck on the vinyl upholstery. I felt my rib cage, satisfied myself that nothing had broken. Not even all that painful, actually.

I found myself staring at the collection of stickers on the dashboard — a Special Forces decal, a "These Colors Don't Run" flag decal, another one that said "Special Forces — I'm the Man your Mother warned you about." After a while, I said, "This your truck?"

"Nah, my buddy owns the towing company and I help out sometimes."

Guy was getting chatty. I said, "He Special Forces?"

A long silence. I didn't know, were you not supposed to ask somebody if they were in the Special Forces or something? Like, he could tell me, but then he'd have to kill me?

I was about to repeat the question when he said, "We both were."

"Huh," I said, and we both went quiet again. He switched on the ballgame. The Red Sox were playing the Seattle Mariners at Fenway Park, and it was a tight, hard-fought, low-scoring game, pretty exciting. I love listening to baseball on the radio. I have a huge flat-panel TV at home, which I got on the friends-and-family discount at work, and baseball in high-definition is awesome. But there's nothing like a ballgame on the radio — the crack of the bat, the rustling crowd, even the stupid ads for auto glass. It's classic. The announcers sound exactly the way they did when I was a kid, and probably sound the same as when my late father was a kid. Their flat, nasal voices are like an old pair of sneakers, comfortable and familiar and broken-in. They use all the well-worn phrases like "high—fly—ball!" and "runners at the corners" and "swing and a miss." I like the way they suddenly get loud and frenzied, shouting things like, "Way back! Way back!"

One of the announcers was commenting about the Sox pitcher, saying, ". . . but even at the top of his game, he's never going to come close to the fastest recorded pitch speed of one hundred point nine miles an hour, thrown by . . .? Jerry, you must know that one."

And the other guy said, "Nolan Ryan."

"Nolan Ryan," the first guy said, "very good. Clocked at Anaheim Stadium, August the twentieth, nineteen-seventy-four." Probably reading off the prompter, some research fed him by a producer.

I said, "Wrong."

The driver turned to me. "Huh?"

I said, "These guys don't know what they're talking about. The fastest recorded pitch was Mark Wohlers."

"Very good," Harley said, nodding. "Mark Wohlers. Hundred and three."

"Right," I said, surprised. "Hundred and three miles per hour, in nineteen-ninety-five."

"Atlanta Braves spring training." Then he smiled, an easy grin, his teeth even and white. "Didn't think anyone else knew that," he said.

"Of course, the fastest pitcher ever, not in the major leagues—"

"Steve Dalkowski," said Harley. "Hundred and ten miles an hour."

"Shattered an umpire's mask," I said, nodding. "So were you a baseball geek when you were a kid, too? Collection of thousands of baseball cards?"

He smiled again. "You got it. Those Topps gum packs with that crappy stale bubble gum inside."

"That always stained one of the cards in the pack, right?"

He chuckled.

"Your dad take you to Fenway a lot?" I said.

"I didn't grow up around here," he said. "Michigan. And my dad wasn't around. Plus we couldn't afford to go games."

"We couldn't either," I said. "So I listened to games on the radio a lot."

"Same here."

"Played baseball in the backyard?" I said. "Break a lot of

windows?"

"We didn't have a backyard."

"Me neither. My friends and I played in a park down the street."

He nodded, smiled.

I felt like I knew the guy. We came from the same background, probably — no money, no backyard, the whole deal. Only I went to college and was sitting here in a suit, and he'd gone into the army like a lot of my high school buddies did.

We listened to the game for a bit. Seattle's designated hitter was up. He swung at the first pitch. You could hear the crack of the bat. "And there's a high fly ball hit deep to left field!" one of the announcers crowed. It was headed right for the glove of a great Red Sox slugger, who also happened to be a famously clumsy outfielder. And a space cadet who did things like disappear from left field, right in the middle of a game, to take a leak. When he wasn't bobbling the ball.

"He's got it," said the announcer. "It's headed right for his glove."

"He's going to drop it," I said.

Harley laughed. "You said it."

"Here it comes," I said.

Harley laughed even louder. "This is painful," he said.

A roar of disappointment in the ballpark. "The ball hit the back of the glove," said the announcer, "as he tried to slide to make the play. This is a major league error right here."

We groaned simultaneously.

Harley switched it off. "I can't take it anymore," he said.

"Thank you," I said as we pulled into the auto body shop parking lot.

It was a kind of scuzzy place that looked like a converted gas station. WILLKIE AUTO BODY, the sign said. The manager on duty was named Abdul and probably wouldn't have an easy time getting through airport security these days. I thought Harley would start offloading the carcass of my poor Acura, but instead he came into the waiting room and watched Abdul take down my insurance information. I

noticed another "Support the Troops" sticker on the wall in here, too, and a Special Forces decal.

Harley said, "Jeremiah at home?"

"Oh, yeah," said Abdul. "Sure. Home with the kids."

"This is a friend of mine," he said. "Make sure you guys take care of him."

I looked around and realized the tow truck driver was talking about me.

"Of course, Kurt," Abdul said.

"Tell Jerry I was here," Harley said.

I read an old copy of Maxim while the tow truck driver and Abdul walked back to the shop. They returned a couple of minutes later.

"Abdul's going to put his best master tech on your car," Harley said. "They do good work here. Computerized paint-mixing system. Nice clean shop. Why don't you guys finish up the paperwork, and I'll get the car in the service bay."

"Thanks, man," I said.

"Okay, Kurt, see you," said Abdul.

I came out a few minutes later and saw Harley sitting in his tow truck, engine idling, listening to the game.

"Hey," he said, "where do you live? I'll drop you off."

"It's pretty far. Belmont."

"Grab your stuff out of the car and jump in."

"You don't mind?"

"I get paid by the hour, buddy. Not by the job."

I got my CDs off the floor of the car and my briefcase and baseball glove off the backseat.

"You used to work in a body shop?" I said when I'd gotten back into the truck.

The walkie-talkie started blaring, and he switched it off. "I've done everything."

"How do you like towing?"

He turned and gave me an Are you out of your mind? look. "I take whatever work I can get."

"People don't like to hire soldiers anymore?"

"People love to hire soldiers," he said. "Just not ones with DDs."

"What's a DD?"

"Dishonorable discharge. You gotta put it down on the application, and as soon as they see that, you're out the door."

"Oh," I said. "Sorry I asked. None of my business."

"No big deal. It just pisses me off. You get a DD, you don't get any VA benefits or pension. Sucks big time."

"How'd it happen?" I said. "If you don't mind my asking."

Another long silence. He hit the turn signal, changed lanes. "Nah, I don't mind." He paused again, and I wasn't sure he was going to answer. Then he said: "The CO of my Special Forces A team ordered half of us to go on this suicide mission, this broke-dick reconnaissance mission in Tikrit. I told the CO there was a ninety-nine percent chance they'd get ambushed, and guess what? The guys got ambushed. Attacked with rocket-propelled grenades. And my buddy Jimmy Donadio was killed."

He fell silent. Stared straight ahead at the road as he drove. Then: "A good kid, just about finished with his tour, had a baby he'd never even seen. I loved that guy. So I just lost it. Went after the CO — headbutted the bastard. Broke his nose."

"Wow," I said. "Jesus. I can't blame you. So you got court-martialed or something?"

He shrugged. "I'm lucky they didn't send me to Leavenworth. But nobody in the command wanted to draw any attention to what went down that night, and they sure as hell didn't want CID looking into it. Bad for army morale. More important, bad PR. So the deal was, dishonorable discharge, no time."

"Wow," I said again. I wasn't sure what CID was, but I wasn't going to ask.

"So are you, like, a lawyer or something?"

"Salesman."

"Where?"

"Entronics. In Framingham."

"Cool. Can you get me a deal on a plasma TV?"

I hesitated. "I don't sell the consumer line, but I might be able to do something."

He smiled. "I'm kidding. I couldn't afford one of those anyway, even wholesale. So, I noticed the glove you got back there. Sweet. Rawlings Gold Glove, Heart-of-the-hide. Same as the pros use. Looks brand new. Right out of the box. Just get it?"

"Um, about two years," I said. "Gift from my wife."

"Oh. You play?"

"Not much. Mostly on my company's team. Softball, not baseball, but my wife didn't know the difference." Our team sucked. We were on a losing streak that resembled the Baltimore Orioles' historically pathetic 1988 season. "You play?"

He shrugged. "Used to."

A long beat of silence.

"In school or something?" I said.

"Got drafted for one of the Detroit Tigers farm teams."

"Seriously?"

"My pitch speed was clocked at ninety-four, ninety-five miles an hour."

"No way. Jesus!" I turned to look at him.

"But that wasn't where my head was at, that point. Enlisted instead. I'm Kurt, by the way." He took his right hand off the wheel and gave me a firm handshake. "Kurt Semko."

"Jason Steadman."

There was another long silence, and then I had an idea.

"We could use a pitcher," I said.

"Who?"

"My company's team. We've got a game tomorrow night, and we sure could use a decent pitcher. How would you like to play on our team tomorrow?"

Another long pause. Then: "Don't you have to work for the company?"

"Guys we play have no idea who works for us and who doesn't."

Kurt went quiet again.

After a minute, I said, "So what do you think?"

He shrugged. "I don't know." He was staring at the road, a half-smile on his face.

At the time it seemed like a fun idea.