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The Killing Kind

Written by Chris Holm

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THE KILLING KIND

CHRIS HOLM

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1.

The streets of downtown Miami shimmered in the evening heat, the summer air rich with spice and song. Neon and rum and the warm ocean breeze conspired to make the city thrum with lurid anticipation. It was, after all, a Friday night in one of the most vibrant cities in the world. Still, no one who walked that night beneath the broad modern portico of the Morales Incorporated Building suspected they'd briefly occupied the spot where a man was about to die.

Edgar Morales pushed through the revolving doors of the gleaming steel-and-glass building that bore his name and stepped onto the sunbaked concrete. After a day spent in climate-controlled comfort, the hot breath of the city set him sweating. He checked his watch. It was precisely six thirteen p.m. Most days, Edgar's car would come around to pick him up at precisely six fifteen—but today was not

most days. Today Edgar's car would not be coming, for it had been disabled. Fixing it would delay his driver long enough to leave Morales exposed so that the man the Corporation—as the Cuban Mafia calls itself—sent to kill him could complete his task.

He wasn't exposed *enough* for Michael Hendricks's taste.

Hendricks watched Morales through the telescopic sight of his M40A3 sniper rifle from his perch some four blocks down the street. His vision was distorted slightly by the tinted window through which he peered, and by the stolen Escalade's vibration as its AC labored to cool its spacious interior. Hendricks had found the vehicle in a long-term parking lot at Miami International a few hours back. Gleaming black with chromed-out rims, an enormous cabin, and tinted windows all around, it made the perfect downtown Miami sniper blind. He would have preferred to set up in one of the many towers that faced Morales Incorporated—shots from above were less likely to encounter an obstruction prior to finding their target, and both witnesses and routes of egress could be more easily planned for and controlled—but that damned overhang shielded the entryway from view at such an angle. So instead, he made do, slipping a valet a hundred bucks for the privilege of parking in the far corner of a boutique hotel's parking lot, which had decent sight lines to the building's entrance. Time was, a hundred bucks could have gotten you a *room* in this town—but not anymore, and certainly not at *this* address.

He'd been sitting there for an hour watching traffic roll by, the AC blasting in a vain attempt to keep the heat and humidity at bay. The air was so heavy and still, the strips of fabric he'd tied to the street signs to serve as wind indica-

tors hadn't moved since he'd first parked. The lack of wind was to Hendricks's advantage. Wind was second only to gravity in its ability to alter a bullet's trajectory, and since its force was not constant, it was far harder to account for. But he'd need to take the humidity into account. Air this water-laden was sure to slow his bullet down—enough, at this distance, to lower his point of impact by three full inches. Three inches could be the difference between a kill shot and a graze.

This muggy weather was disgusting, Hendricks thought, much like the cup of café con leche that sat undrunk in the cup holder beside him—thick, cloying, and sticky. And the palette of the city grated on him—everything was canary and coral and aquamarine. Hendricks missed the dark greens and cold blues of northern New England, where even the hottest summer sun failed to warm the deepest hollows of the forest, and the water ran cold all year long. Miami was beautiful, sure, but that beauty was as garish and artificial as the siliconed women who walked its streets.

Everything about the place felt insincere.

Best to get the job over with and get out of here.

Through his scope, Hendricks watched Morales look left and right, surveying the busy street as if for his missing ride, and then descend the wide concrete steps toward the curb. Men in business suits jostled for position beside bronzed women in skimpy beach gear, waiting for the crosswalk light to change.

"We're a go," Hendricks said. He turned the key in the ignition, cutting the engine but leaving the battery engaged. The world around him went silent, and the car's vibration stilled. "Tell me you're in the system."

"I'm in," came the reply through his Bluetooth, "but understand, the security is first-rate. It cycles through its diagnostics at five-second intervals. If any unauthorized command is detected, an alarm is triggered. And if that happens, the cops'll be at your position in minutes."

"You saying you can't do it?"

"I'm saying once you give the go-ahead, you'll have three seconds, no more."

"Guess I'd better make those seconds count," Hendricks said. "On my mark."

Morales reached the curb. Hendricks pivoted his rifle first left, then right, taking in the scene through his scope. He gave a nod of satisfaction at what he saw and lowered the passenger-side front window, sighting his target through the opening, his weapon's bipod steadied against the leather sill.

"Mark."

At once, the lights for blocks around changed so that the intersections were red leading to this stretch of road, and green leading away. As traffic cleared in front of the Morales building, the light at the crosswalk changed as well, and the crowd around Morales stepped out into the street.

"Three," said the voice in his ear.

Hendricks drew a measured breath and held it. His body processed the complex math behind the shot by instinct, making fine adjustments to account for the heat, air pressure, and distance from sea level. His heart beat slow and steady in his chest.

"Two."

His body motionless, Hendricks squeezed the trigger—three pounds' pressure, no more, no less.

"One."

A crack like thunder echoed down the street.

When Morales heard the shot, he hit the deck. Hendricks had to hand it to the guy, he had good instincts—he reacted a full second before anyone else in sight. But ultimately, his gesture of self-preservation was futile; by the time you hear the gunshot, the bullet's come and gone.

Lucky for Morales, he wasn't Hendricks's target.

Hendricks's target was Javier Cruz—the hitman the Corporation had sent to kill Morales. A button man for the Corporation since their early days running *bolita* rackets out of Little Havana, Cruz'd killed more men than he could count.

Not that anyone would know to look at him. Those he passed on his stroll down Brickell toward Morales Incorporated were like as not to smile at the kindly old Cuban man in his crisp white guayabera shirt, raw linen pants, and straw fedora. They had no idea his steel gray mustache hid beneath it the grisly scar of a lip split by a policeman's baton, or that the policeman in question hadn't lived to see the sun rise the following morning. They didn't realize the limp in his gait wasn't age or sciatica, but the result of two lead slugs fired off by the wife of a local politician who'd made it his business to disrupt the Corporation's. She woke to find him in her bedroom while her husband was out of town, and if she hadn't been so beautiful—or so very, very naked—perhaps Cruz wouldn't have allowed her time to reach the gun in the nightstand. She buried two bullets in his leg, and he buried her in half a dozen spots the state over, leaving only a bedroom full of blood and a ring finger for her husband to find on his return, resting atop a photo of their four daughters. That man never spoke a word about the Corporation again.

Those Cruz passed didn't know they were in the presence of a monster. But unfortunately for Cruz, Hendricks knew.

And unfortunately for Cruz, Hendricks never missed.

When Hendricks pulled the trigger, Cruz's head exploded. For a moment, what was left of him stood there, inches from Morales, a steel blade gleaming in his hand—his bloodied fedora fluttering to the ground behind him. Then his body slumped to the sidewalk like a dropped marionette.

As the gunshot's echoes died, the night was filled with the sounds of panic. The shriek of voices and tires both. The bleat of car horns. The wail of a distant siren fast approaching. Everyone within earshot had been trained by one awful news report after another to await that second shot, or third, or fifth. Trained to wonder if they'd prove another victim in the killer's tally.

Hendricks, on the other hand, calmly withdrew the rifle and raised the blackened window. He knew it would take them several minutes to determine where the shot had come from—more than enough time for him to make his escape.

"You get out of the system clean?" he quietly asked.

"Who do you think you're talking to?" the voice in his ear replied. "They'll never even know I was there."

"Good," said Hendricks. "Signing off."

"Safe travels."

At the curb outside his office building, Edgar Morales scrabbled to his feet, ashen and trembling. Though he tried, he couldn't tear his gaze from his would-be killer's corpse. If he'd had any inkling it would come to this when he'd begun buying up cheap tenements in Miami's dodgy

Goulds neighborhood with an eye toward gentrifying the area—and cleaning up a stronghold of the Corporation's narcotics sales in the process—his altruistic streak would have taken a backseat to his healthy sense of self-preservation. But he hadn't known, any more than he'd known until this very moment that he had no stomach for killing, even in self-defense.

His phone rang in his pocket. Morales flinched as if slapped, and then answered.

"H-hello?" he said.

"Are you all right?" Hendricks asked.

Morales hesitated. As a point in fact, he was pretty fucking far from all right. But instead, he told Hendricks, "Yes. I trust my payment was received?"

"If it wasn't," Hendricks said, "you wouldn't be around to ask me that."

Morales laughed—brittle, barking. "That's not exactly a comforting thought."

"Well, just think: now you've got your whole life to come to grips with it. Pleasure doing business with you."

And then the line went dead.

2.

It was a cool August night on the southern shore of Lake Geneva, and Jean-Luc Vian's château was alive with candlelight—a glimmering jewel nestled in the crushed velvet of the French countryside, its rich greens fading to black as the soft light gave way to darkness. The grounds were bedecked for a grand party, and the flagstone drive—which led from the rural one-lane road, past the massive iron gates and guest quarters, and up to the main house—was lined with luxury automobiles. BMWs and Mercedes, mostly, interspersed with a few Jaguars, a Bentley, and even one god-awful yellow Lamborghini, the last driven by that boorish football player Caravagas that Vian's wife had insisted he invite.

No doubt that deceitful cow had by now lured the man to one of their many bedrooms, Vian thought, where their exploits would join those of her prior dalliances

as the talk of every dinner party from Paris to Haute-Savoie.

If it weren't for the fact that she was daughter to the foreign minister, his pride would have insisted he leave her long ago. Theirs was a marriage of political and social expediency, not love—a fact that was too well known amid the corridors of power for Vian's taste.

Then again, Vian thought, for all her faults, at least *she* was enjoying the party. He, on the other hand, apparently had work to attend to, having been summoned by text to dial in to an emergency conference call—though what could be so pressing at this late an hour, his employer didn't say.

Vian punched his security code into the keypad on his office door, waited for the electronic whir as the lock disengaged, then stepped inside. As he shut the door behind him, the lock engaged once more, and the sounds of the string quartet and drunken laughter dropped away, deadened by his office's soundproofing.

It wasn't until he raised the lights that he realized he was not alone.

"Who are you?" Vian asked the man in French. "How did you—"

"—get in here?" his uninvited guest ventured, his own French excellent but accented. "Mr. Vian, there's no need for a man of your breeding and intellect to be so trite—or so dreadfully sincere. You don't *really* expect me to answer your first question, do you? And as to your second, I suspect if you ruminate upon it for a moment, you could save me the tedium of explaining."

So Vian ruminated upon it. It made no sense. How could this man have breached the gate and slipped past all his

guards? Vian was sure he hadn't been *invited*, for his employer—who, in addition to supplying his personal security detail, ran background checks on all attendees of Vian's parties—had sent along the dossiers they'd compiled for everybody on the invite list just yesterday, and this man was not among them.

Perhaps he'd bluffed his way through, then. Certainly, the stranger was dressed for the role of partygoer, in his slim black suit, crisp dove-gray shirt, and matching tie. He was seated in Vian's own leather desk chair, his black oxfords propped atop the desk. Black kid gloves graced his slender hands.

But bluffing alone could not have gained him access to this room—only Vian had the access code. Well, Vian, and his employer, who had installed the door locks, the encrypted phone and Internet connections, and the soundproofing as well.

And then, at once, Vian understood. The late-night summons. The lack of dossier on this man. The breach of Vian's inner sanctum.

It seemed the terms of his employment had been reevaluated.

The stranger noted with some satisfaction the change in Vian's expression from puzzlement to despair. "Sit down," he said, withdrawing his feet from the desk and plucking a silenced firearm off the blotter as he rose.

Vian did as the man instructed, dropping heavily into one of the high-backed chairs that faced the desk from this side.

"Good," the man said, a smile dancing across his face. "Now: tell me why I'm here." That face was neither young nor old—oddly wise, yet unlined, as though he'd never

in his life encountered a troubling thought. His hair was sandy blond, perhaps interspersed with white, perhaps not. Vian was struck by the fact that—despite the dramatic circumstances of their meeting—if he passed this man on the street a month from now, he probably would not recognize him.

But Vian knew he would not be passing anybody on the street a month from now. Vian knew his life would end tonight.

"You are here to kill me," Vian replied.

The stranger laughed. "Well, *yes*, but do you know why?"

"Does it matter?"

"It does to the man who hired me, which means it does to me. You see, I've been asked to send a message. Your death is merely to be the punctuation mark at the end of said message."

"All right then, what's the message?"

"I've been instructed to tell you your work in the Sudan was unacceptable. I'm told that will mean something to you. It does, does it not?"

It did. Vian's employer was, on paper, a security contractor, one with fingers in a great many pies at France's Ministry of Defense, including the manufacture and distribution of weapons and ordnance, the contracting of private military personnel, and consulting for strategic planning. Off book, his firm was responsible for three quarters of all weapons sales on the continent of Africa, including those to all sides of the Darfur conflict. Vian, for a time, was in charge of such sales, but he found that even his own prized moral flexibility had its limits. He'd begun funneling communiqués to the UN in secret—communiqués which im-

plicated his employer in breaking the UN African Union arms embargo. Though nothing was made of these revelations publicly—due to his firm's ties to not only French defense but to many other NATO nations as well—his actions led to his company losing seven billion dollars' worth of contracts.

He'd thought he covered his tracks such that his involvement would never be discovered.

Vian could only nod, certain it was far too late for him to deny it. At least, he thought, I will not die denying the only decent thing I've ever done.

"Good. I've been further instructed to glean from you, if possible, whatever I can about who *else* may have been involved in your unacceptable performance."

"Why on earth should I cooperate with you?" Vian spat. "You've already told me you plan to kill me, and my wife is too public a figure for you to harm, which means you've no longer any leverage."

"That's not *entirely* accurate," the stranger said, and then he shot Vian in the knee.

Vian shrieked. Every muscle in his body tensed at once. He jerked out of his chair, spilling onto the floor. The pain in his knee was white-hot, exquisite. It spread up through his groin and settled like lead in his stomach. Waves of dizziness and nausea shook his body, and unconsciousness encroached, spotty black at the edges of his vision. And all the while, beyond the soundproofed walls of his office, the party continued unabated—his guests oblivious to his suffering.

Somewhere, a thousand miles away it seemed, a mobile phone chirped. The stranger looked startled for a moment, and then reached into his suit coat, removing from his inside pocket a cheap, pre-paid burner phone.

"Yes?" the stranger snapped, impatience hiding puzzlement.

"This Engelmann?" The voice was coarse, uneducated—American, to his ear.

"Where did you get this number?"

"My organization has worked with you before," he said.

"You're with the Council?" Engelmann asked. They were the only Americans for whom he'd ever worked. The Council was a group of representatives from each of the major crime families operating in the United States—Italian, Russian, Cuban, Salvadoran, Ukrainian, you name it. Though their organizations were often rivals, Council members convened on occasion to handle issues on which their respective organizations' interests aligned. American organized crime was often too parochial to tap someone such as Engelmann; each family had their own little fiefdom, their own way of doing things—their own hitmen should any hitting be required. Only rarely when they came together did they deign to hire outside themselves—and even then, Engelmann suspected, it was simply so they needn't decide which family got the job, the risk, the blame should the hit fail, or the glory should it succeed.

But on the rare occasion they did hire out, they paid very, *very* well.

"That's right," said the American. "We've got a job for you." He paused a moment then, noting for the first time Vian's anguished wailing in the background. "I, uh, catch you at a bad time?"

"Not at all," said Engelmann. "In fact, you've just rescued me from the most *dreadful* party." Then he held the phone to his chest, covering the mouthpiece, and said to Vian, "I'm sorry—I have to take this."

The silenced firearm jumped three times in Engelmann's hand—each report no more than the popping of a champagne cork—and Vian's cries ceased. Such a waste, thought Engelmann; given time, Vian would have told him anything he asked. But in reality, the loss was minor—Vian was hardly the worthiest of subjects for Engelmann's more esoteric ministrations, and the bonus he'd been promised for any information obtained would doubtless pale before the sum the Council would likely offer.

"Now," Engelmann said into the phone, "where were we?"