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Opening Extract from...

Kill the Next One

Written by Frederico Axat

Translated from the Spanish by David Frye

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TRANSLATED FROM THE
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To my parents,
Luz L. Di Pirro and
Raœl E. Axat

PART ONE

1

Ted McKay was about to put a bullet through his brain when the doorbell rang. Insistently.

He paused. He couldn't press the trigger when he had someone waiting at the front door.

Leave, whoever you are.

Again, the doorbell. Then a man's voice.

"Open up! I know you can hear me!"

The voice reached him in his study with amazing clarity. It was so clear that for an instant Ted wondered if he had really heard it.

He looked around, as if to find something in the empty study that might prove that someone had really shouted. He saw his account books, the Monet reproduction, the desk, and finally the letter in which he had explained it all to Holly.

"Please open up!"

Ted still held the Browning inches from his head; its weight was beginning to tire his arm. His plan wouldn't work if the guy at the door heard him shoot and called the police. Holly was at Disney

World with the girls, and he didn't want her to get this news so far from home. No way.

The bell stopped ringing. Now, pounding at the door.

"Come on! I won't leave till you let me in!"

The pistol began to shake. Ted lowered his arm, rested the gun in his lap. He ran the fingers of his left hand through his hair and again cursed the stranger. Somebody selling magazines? Door-to-door salesmen weren't welcome in this neighborhood, especially not when they acted as obnoxious as this guy.

For a few seconds the shouts and the knocking stopped. Ted began to raise the gun back to his temple, slowly, very slowly.

He was just starting to think the guy must have gotten tired and taken off when a renewed barrage of shouts and banging proved him wrong. But Ted wasn't going to open the door—not him. He'd wait. Sooner or later the asshole would have to give up, wouldn't he?

Then his eye was drawn to something lying on the desk: a piece of paper folded double, like the note he'd left for Holly, except this one didn't have his wife's name written on it. Had he been so dumb that he'd forgotten to toss a draft of his note? While the guy at the door continued shouting, he consoled himself with the thought that some good, at least, had come from the unexpected interruption. He unfolded the note and read.

What he saw there chilled his blood. It was his own handwriting. But he had no memory of writing these words.

Open the door
It's your only way out

Had he written it in a context he couldn't recall? While playing some game with Cindy or Nadine, maybe? He could find no explanation for the note—not in this crazy situation, with a crazy guy about to pound the front door down. But of course there must have been some rational explanation.

Kid yourself all you want.

The Browning in his right hand weighed a ton.

"Open up now, Ted!"

He jerked his head up, alert. Had he just heard his own name? Ted had never been close with his neighbors, but he thought he could at least recognize their voices. This guy didn't sound like any of them. He stood up and left the pistol on the desk. He knew he'd have no choice but to see what it was all about. Thinking it over for a second, he decided it wasn't the end of the world. He'd get rid of the asshole, whoever he was, and get back to his study and end his life, once and for all. He'd been planning this for weeks, and he wasn't going to back out at the last moment because of some jerk selling magazines or some such crap.

He stood up with determination. A small jar sat on the corner of the desk, filled with old pens, paper clips, half-used erasers—all sorts of junk. Ted quickly upended the jar and found the key he had dropped inside it just two minutes earlier. Picking it up, he looked it over quizzically, an object he had thought he'd never see again. By now he was supposed to be sprawled back across his recliner, with gunshot residue on his fingers, floating toward the light.

When you've decided to take your own life—it doesn't matter whether you have any doubts about your decision—those final minutes will test your will. Ted had just learned this lesson, and he loathed the idea of having to go through it all over again.

He went to the door to his study feeling truly annoyed, put the key in the lock, turned it, and opened the door. He felt another twinge at seeing the note he had taped to the front of the door, just above eye level. It was a warning for Holly. "Honey, I left a copy of the key to the study on top of the fridge. Don't let the kids in. I love you." It seemed cruel, but Ted had thought it all through. He didn't want one of his girls to find him lying behind the desk with a hole through his head. On the other hand, dying in his study made perfect sense. He had seriously weighed the pros and cons of jumping in the river or traveling far away and throwing himself under the wheels of a train somewhere, but he knew the uncertainty would be harder on them. Especially on Holly. She would need to see him with her own

eyes, need to be sure. Need to feel…the *impact*. She was young and beautiful and could make a new life for herself. She'd move on.

A salvo of knocking.

"Coming!" Ted yelled.

The knocking stopped.

Open the door. It's your only way out.

He could see the stranger's silhouette through the tall, narrow window beside the door. He crossed the living room with slow, almost defiant steps. Once more he examined everything, much as he had studied the key a few moments ago. He saw the immense flat-screen TV, the table with seats for fifteen guests, the porcelain vases. In his own way, he had taken his leave of all these worldly objects. And yet here he was again, good old Teddy, wandering through his own house like a ghost.

He stopped short. Could this be his own version of "the light"?

For a second he felt a wild urge to run back to his study and check whether his body lay sprawled behind the desk. He reached out and ran his fingers over the back of the sofa. He felt the leather, smooth and cool to his touch, too real to be a figment of his imagination, he thought. But how could he be certain?

He threw the door open. As soon as he saw the young man at the threshold, he knew how he'd survived as a door-to-door salesman despite his bad manners. He was maybe twenty-five, impeccably dressed in white trousers, a snakeskin belt, and a polo shirt with bright, colorful horizontal stripes. He looked more like a golfer than a salesman, but the beat-up leather briefcase in his right hand clashed with his preppy clothes. His hair was blond and shoulder-length, his eyes were sky blue, and his smile was rakish. Ted could easily see Holly, or any of the women in the neighborhood, buying whatever junk the guy had to offer.

"Whatever it is, I'm not interested," Ted said.

The smile grew broader.

"Oh, I'm afraid I'm not here to sell you anything," the guy said, as if the very idea were beyond ridiculous.

Ted glanced over the stranger's shoulder. No car was parked along the curb out front, or anywhere along Sullivan Boulevard. It wasn't as hot out as it had been lately, but walking any distance under the afternoon sun should have left some traces on this shameless dude's face. Besides, why park so far away?

"Don't be scared," the young man said, as if he could read Ted's mind. "My partner dropped me off in front here. Not to raise suspicions in the neighborhood."

The mention of an accomplice didn't faze Ted. Getting killed in a robbery would be even more dignified than shooting himself.

"I'm busy. I need you to go."

Ted started to close the door but the man reached in and stopped him. It wasn't necessarily a hostile move. He had an imploring gleam in his eye.

"My name is Justin Lynch, Mr. McKay. If you'll just…"

"How do you know my name?"

"If you'll just let me come in and talk to you for ten minutes, I'll explain everything."

There was a moment of suspense. Ted had no intention of letting the guy in—that much was clear. But he had to admit to feeling kind of curious about why he was there. In the end, reason won.

"Sorry. This isn't a good time."

"You're wrong. It's the per—"

Ted slammed the door. Lynch's last words reached him, muffled by the door, but perfectly audible. "It's the perfect time." Ted remained facing the door, listening, as if he knew there'd be more to follow.

And so there was. Lynch spoke even louder to make himself heard.

"I know what you're about to do with the nine millimeter you left in your study. I'll promise you one thing: I won't try to talk you out of it."

Ted opened the door.

2

Ted had planned his suicide with consummate care. This was no impulsive, last-minute decision, plagued with loose ends. He wouldn't be one of those pathetic guys who botch the job in a pitiful cry for attention. Or so he had thought. Because if he had been all that careful, how had Lynch found out? The stranger with the broad smile and the perfect good looks had been right on target about the caliber of Ted's pistol and where he had left it. Venturing that Ted was about to take his own life wasn't totally off the wall, perhaps, but if it was a guess it was a very lucky one. Yet Lynch had tossed it off without a trace of hesitation.

They sat on either side of the table. Ted felt an old, familiar sensation: the shiver of an adrenaline surge, followed by that old mental sharpness and total concentration on beating his opponent. He hadn't played in a chess tournament in years, but the feeling was unmistakable. And pleasant.

"So Travis asked you to spy on me," he stated.

Lynch, who had set his leather briefcase on the table and seemed

about to open it, held off, a look of consternation on his face.

"Your business partner has nothing to do with this, Ted. Mind if I call you Ted?"

Ted shrugged.

"I don't see any photos of your kids, Nadine and Cindy," Lynch said, his gazed fixed on the contents of his briefcase. He seemed to be looking for something.

Indeed, there were no family photos. Ted had removed them all from the living room. A piece of advice: if you're going to kill yourself, move any photographs of loved ones out of the way first. It's simpler to plan when your family isn't looking over your shoulder.

"Never mention my daughters."

Lynch displayed his stunning smile. He raised his hands.

"I was just trying to win your trust, a bit of chitchat. I've seen their photos before, and I know they're both with their mother in Florida now. They went down to visit their grandparents, didn't they?"

It sounded like a line from a gangster movie. *We know where your family is; don't be a wise guy*. There was something genuine about Lynch's attitude, though, as if he really were trying to be friendly.

"I let you into my house. I think there's already a certain amount of trust between us."

"I'm glad."

"Tell me what you know about my family."

Lynch sat with his hands on top of his briefcase. He made a dismissive gesture with one of them.

"Oh, not too much, I'm afraid. We don't like to meddle any more than we have to. I know they get back on Friday, which gives us three days to finish our business. More than enough time."

"Our business?"

"Of course!"

Lynch pulled two thin folders from the briefcase and set them to one side. He pushed the briefcase away.

"Ted, have you ever considered doing a hit job?"

Talk about getting straight to the point!

"Are you with the police? If you are, you should have identified yourself."

Ted stood up. He was sure the folders were filled with lurid photographs. They'd been watching him as a murder suspect and the suicide plan had been the decisive piece of evidence to prove his guilt. That's why Lynch had insisted on getting into the house. Was he an FBI agent?

"I'm not with the police, Ted. Please sit."

"I want you out of my house—now." Ted pointed to the door as if Lynch didn't know the way out.

"Do you really want me to leave before we can talk over how we know about your suicide?"

The guy was good. Ted *did* want to know.

"You have five minutes to explain."

Ted didn't sit down.

"Fair enough," Lynch said. "I'll explain it to you now. I work for some people who'd like to learn how a man such as yourself comes to know people such as the ones I have here." He placed a hand on the folders. "If you'll allow me, I'm going to open one of these folders and we'll take a peek in it. You'll get it right away. You're a smart man."

Lynch opened the folder and placed it in the center of the table and turned to face Ted, who remained standing with his hands on his hips.

The first page was a copy of a police file. Stapled in one corner were photos, front and profile, of a man perhaps in his thirties. His skin was tanned and his hair neatly combed and gelled. He peered defiantly into the lens, his chin raised slightly and his light-blue eyes open wide. According to the caption, his name was Edward Blaine.

"Blaine has had a few minor brushes with the law in his time: petty larceny, assault," Lynch said as he turned over the page. "This time he's accused of killing his girlfriend."

Ted had been right about one thing: the folders were full of lurid photos. The one staring at him now was of a woman who had been brutally murdered, lying in the narrow space between a bed and a dresser; there were at least seven stab wounds on her naked torso.

"Her name was Amanda Herdman. She and Blaine saw each other off and on—nothing too formal. He got cheap drugs for her, and every now and then they'd try something heavier. But from what his friends and her friends say, their relationship was an endless cycle of quarreling and making up. When she turned up dead in her apartment, the police started with Blaine. The guy admitted he'd fought with Herdman in a fit of jealousy, but of course he hadn't stabbed her. You want the punch line? They couldn't prove anything. Had to let him go."

At some point Ted had sat down. He couldn't take his eyes off the photographs. Lynch flipped the page. There were some close-ups: Amanda's swollen eyes, deep cuts to her chest, bruises everywhere.

"Innocent?" Ted asked, confused.

"The bastard was careful not to hit her with his fists. Naturally, no murder weapon was ever found. His prints were all over the house, but there were none on the body."

"But he practically confessed when he admitted they'd fought."

"His lawyers argued that he had made his confession under duress, which was more or less true, and they could prove it. The technicality that got him off was the forensic analysis of the time of death. The prosecutor's expert placed the time of death between seven and ten p.m. Multiple witnesses testified to seeing Blaine at a cheap dive, the Black Sombrero Bar, during that time frame. Seems he'd been especially concerned with having as many people as possible see him there; he had more than thirty reliable witnesses. There was even security camera footage from the parking lot."

Ted leafed through the pages. There were a few more photos of Herdman's body and copies of files with passages highlighted.

"You get it now, don't you, Ted?"

Ted was starting to understand.

"How do your people know Blaine killed her?"

"The organization I represent has informants inside the prison system. I'm not talking about criminals; we prefer not to deal with them. Our informants are lawyers, judges, and aides who know when

a murder case smells funny. Our business is…*eradicating* any doubt. As for Blaine, the explanation is extremely simple, though for him it was almost certainly a case of dumb luck, nothing more. We hired an expert and asked how they could have made such a huge mistake in calculating the time of death. He told us that the tests they ran depend on the body temperature of the deceased, which they take the moment the corpse is discovered. Core body temperature decreases according to an established—"

Ted stopped him. "I know the method. I've watched *CSI*, too."

Lynch laughed.

"I'll get to the point, then. We figured it out when we visited the scene of the crime—Amanda Herdman's first-floor apartment, which is vacant now. There's an industrial laundry in the basement, directly under her floor. The main ventilation duct from the dryers passes directly beneath the spot where her body was found. It kept the corpse warm so that the heat loss proceeded more slowly than is typical."

"In other words, the guy killed her earlier in the day."

"Exactly. Some six to eight hours earlier. The murder didn't take place at night, but in the middle of the day, before Blaine went to the bar."

"And there was no way to reopen the case?"

"He'd already been tried and found innocent. We don't put the blame on the justice system; we prefer to think that sometimes a bastard slips through the cracks. It happens the other way around, too, sadly. But this isn't about weighing both sides, is it?"

Ted didn't need to hear more.

"And what you want from me is to kill Blaine, isn't it?"

Lynch flashed his perfect teeth.

"Like I said, you're a smart man."