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Justice for All

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

Three Months Earlier

VIKTOR DANILOV had killed more people than he cared to remember, in more ways than he cared to describe, and while he didn't take any pleasure from murder, he didn't take any pain either. For Danilov, death was just a way of life.

He stood motionless in front of the church, sporting a black rain slicker and wide-brimmed fedora. A tall man, at least six feet four, with a wiry frame that carried no excess fat, and skin that was almost translucent. The midday sun beat down on his shoulders but the heat didn't bother him. Nothing did. He was in the zone. Controlled breathing, slowed heart rate, his mind a blank canvas save for one thing. His target. In Danilov's experience, clarity of thought led to clarity of action.

He pulled on a pair of clear latex gloves, first covering the sickle on the back of his left hand, then the red hammer tattooed on his disfigured right, before pushing open the heavy oak doors and ducking inside. The church was empty, and a stifling aroma of dust and disuse hung heavy in the air. Etiquette demanded that he remove his fedora, but he left it on. He bolted the door then walked forward to claim a seat in the rear pew.

His eyes were drawn to the altar. The venerable old table was safely ensconced behind a communion railing, its pitted surface home to an ornate wooden cross and a jewel-encrusted reliquary. The railing annoyed him, providing so obvious a barrier between the priest and his so-called flock. What was the priest afraid of? Did he need protection from those that he sought to enlighten? Organised religion. A crutch for the weak. Praying to some unseen deity was for fools and savages. He checked the steel watch that encircled his wrist. It was almost time.

The door to the sacristy opened outwards and a priest emerged. He was garbed head to toe in a traditional black cassock, but the cincture was tied a little too low around his waist, which had the unfortunate effect of exaggerating his paunch. After casting a weary glance around the church, he shuffled over to the lone confessional booth and disappeared inside.

An old Russian proverb flitted through Danilov's mind—not all who wear cowls are monks. Maybe he'd toy with this one a little. He rose from the pew and headed for the booth, where he made himself uncomfortable on the faded kneeler. The small shutter in the dividing wall slid open to reveal a thin wire mesh.

'Yes, my son?' The priest's avuncular tone was perfect. How could a man not admit his failings to so friendly a voice?

'Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,' began Danilov, his Russian accent as thick as molasses.

'How long has it been since your last confession?'

'I not remember.'

'Do not worry, my son, many of the flock become separated from the shepherd at some stage of their lives, but the important thing is that you're back on the path towards righteousness. What is it that you wish to confess to?'

'Murder.'

The priest stiffened on the other side of the booth. When he next spoke, his voice was measured and sombre. 'You have committed a diabolical act. The taking of life is a power that resides with God, and God alone. In what circumstances did this death occur?'

'Circumstances, Father?'

'How did it happen, my son? Was it an unfortunate accident of some sort?'

'*Nyet*, no accident. You not understand. Man not dead yet.'

'So you have yet to kill a man, but you intend to?'

'I have killed many men, Father, but they not important. I want forgiveness for man I'm about to kill.'

'I cannot grant forgiveness for such a deed ahead of its undertaking, for a man cannot be truly contrite for a heinous act he has yet to commit, only afraid, for he knows that he is about to set out on the long and lonely road to damnation. Put these dark thoughts from your mind, my son, stay here and pray with me, and together we will find succour in the healing arms of the Lord.'

'That I cannot do. Man must die. I must kill him. I leave now.'

The Russian rose to his feet and stepped out of the booth. His chest rose and fell with all the randomness of a metronome. A horn-handled stiletto appeared in his hand. When he thumbed the release catch, five inches of stainless steel sprang forth soundlessly.

In…out went his breathing.

He opened the door to the confessional. The priest half turned in the confined space to look up at him. His face showed surprise, then fear. The old man's mouth started to open but the time for talking was past. Danilov pushed on the priest's forehead to expose a mottled neck, then slashed left to right, cutting through folds of scraggly flesh to sever the carotid artery. Blood spurted out, a few splatters hit his rain slicker. No matter. The priest's eyes turned glassy while Danilov cleaned his knife on the holy man's vestments.

In…out went his breathing.

Just two more tasks to complete. He busied himself with the corpse for a few seconds then stood back to appraise his work. The priest's lifeless eyes stared no longer, having been covered by a black silk blindfold. Danilov let the door of the confessional swing shut to leave the body entombed in its upright coffin, then headed for the altar. Once there, he spread out twelve playing cards in front of the wooden cross—jacks, queens and kings, the three picture cards from each suit. Game over. Time to leave. He got as far as the main door then doubled back to the sidewall to light a solitary candle. It never hurt to cover all the bases.

His breathing went in…out, cool as you like. For Viktor Danilov, it had been just another day at the office.

CHAPTER ONE

ZAC HUNTER was nervous. Not scared nervous, but excited, as today was the big day. Things hadn't gone well for the prosecution thus far, but all that was about to change. He popped the muscles in his neck and shuffled his ass on the wooden bench. LA courtrooms weren't built for comfort.

The public gallery was rammed full, and it had been that way since day one of the trial. There was plenty of local interest in the case, but few people had more emotionally invested in the outcome than him. The room was dark, the atmosphere sombre. Oak panelling covered the walls while a scuffed tile floor ran underfoot. Wooden fixtures and fittings abounded, and they looked like oak too. A small forest had been cut down to outfit this place. There were no windows, which meant no natural light and no outside distractions. Instead, strip lights flickered overhead, their low wattage out-

put bathing the room in a sickly glow. Lunch recess was almost over, and the air was alive with the gentle hum of a hundred murmured conversations, but Hunter was silent, his mouth too dry to talk.

Ahead of him, on the other side of the railing that separated the general populace from the business end of the room, were the attorneys' tables. To the left the defence, to the right the prosecution. Eight people were present, but Hunter only had eyes for one. He stared at the back of the defendant's head, his jaw set firm. Carlos Montero. Salvadorian immigrant. Kidnapper, pornographer, dead man walking. On trial for the abduction and murder of seven kids, and also responsible for screwing up Hunter's life. If looks could kill, Señor Montero would have required the immediate services of an undertaker.

The Salvadorian had been in the movie business. The snuff movie business. He'd plucked homeless kids from the city's darkened recesses, pumped them full of crack, then locked them in a room with nothing but a cheap video camera and a six-foot-six, three-hundred-pound paedophile named Bones for company. Six children had gone missing over a period of three months, each one resurfacing in a dumpster, their broken bodies tossed away like so much trash. Hunter had worked the case hard, harder than he'd ever worked any case before, putting in hour after hour, week after week, month after month, until time ceased to have any meaning, until life itself ceased to have any meaning other than bringing down the killer.

He'd become obsessed, working himself beyond exhaustion, until even sleep had failed to provide any refuge, his nights haunted by visions of the children's violated bodies, their screams of agony ringing in his ears each time he awoke. He'd kept a bucket by his bed, as he'd start each day by hacking up the contents of his stomach, his subconscious desper-

ate to purge itself of the horrors of the night before. And the days—the fucking days—were even worse than the nights. Constant detective work with no clear leads, going from pillar to post without direction, feeling like nothing more than a fraud with a badge, all the while waiting for that terrible moment when another young body would be found stashed in some back alley. Tracking down the victims' families to deliver the terrible news. Attending funerals where lines of sobbing mourners watched tiny caskets being lowered into the ground. Then waiting for the whole damn cycle to start up again.

But just when he'd thought he might finally crack under the pressure, the abduction of Julie Delmar had broken the case wide open. She'd run away from home after a row with her stepfather, and had been missing for two days when the calls had started to come in. Just two days. When she'd quit home, her clothes had been clean, her hair had been tied in neat bunches, and her freckled face had been devoid of grime. Compared to the other street kids, she'd have stood out. Enough to be seen. Enough to be remembered. Witnesses placed her buying a foot-long chilli dog from a street vendor on Sunset, cadging for loose change outside Grauman's, and being bundled into the back of a white panel truck on Franklin. One sharp cookie had even had the foresight to make a note of the truck's licence plate, a plate that had led first to the paedophile Bones, and then to Montero.

The Salvadorian had initially denied all knowledge of Julie Delmar's whereabouts, but after thirty minutes of gentle persuasion his memory had returned. He'd led Hunter to a derelict steelworks on the edge of town, and once inside, up a flight of steel steps and along a walkway to what had formerly been the foreman's office. The windows had been boarded up, the wooden door padlocked top and bottom. Approaching sirens had begun to ring out their clarion call

as Hunter had burst into the room to find Julie lying peacefully on a mildew-stained mattress. She'd looked for all the world like she was asleep, but this was one nap she wouldn't be waking up from. Hunter had been too late.

The memories of that day continued to haunt him. How he'd been so damn close to saving Julie's life but had still come up short. How he'd cradled the young girl's body in his arms, her eyes glassed over, her pale skin cold to the touch. How he'd failed her. How he'd failed them all. How someone had to pay.

He watched as Montero shifted around in his seat to look back over the courtroom. The Salvadorian's beady eyes flitted from person to person until they finally met Hunter's unwavering stare. The wounds on the guilty man's face remained prominent—a broken nose that kinked sharply to the left, a gap where his two front teeth had once resided. Hunter's blood began to boil. This case wasn't business, it was strictly personal. Just when he thought his fury had peaked, the Salvadorian tossed him a wide grin and turned back to his attorney.

Hunter's rough hands balled into fists. He forced himself to take ten deep breaths, just like the bullshit anger management classes had taught him, then looked back up to find that Montero's attorney was whispering into her client's ear. She was an attractive woman somewhere in her early thirties, wearing a black business suit with a crisp white blouse beneath. Power dresser. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a neat ponytail, and there was a pair of designer glasses perched on her freckled nose. The freckles made her look young and innocent. Hunter suspected she was anything but.

Her name was Rebecca Finch, and she'd led the prosecuting attorney on a merry dance thus far, objecting almost every time he'd had the audacity to open his mouth. She'd thrown doubt on the credibility of witnesses, argued that evidence

was circumstantial or inadmissible, and bamboozled the jurors with so many legal technicalities that their heads were swimming with jargon by the end of each day. She'd made the case against the Salvadorian look weak. The confession that Hunter had beaten out of him hadn't been worth the paper it had been written on. Even the fact that Montero had led him to the very steelworks where the girl's body had been found had counted for nothing. Everything was inadmissible, as his interrogation technique was adjudged to have been overly energetic. The review board had called it 'use of excessive force' just before they'd stripped him of his badge and shown him the door.

So there was a lack of hard evidence. Montero had been careful to distance himself from the operation, leaving Bones to take all the risks. It was Bones who'd left a mattress soaked with DNA evidence at the steelworks, Bones who'd left his fingerprints on the digital video camera, and Bones who'd starred in the snuff movies found on the camera's memory card. Montero's Salvadorian hands were clean. And Finch had played on that Salvadorian angle. Hinted that institutionalised racism was at work. Suggested that her client might not have been in this situation if it hadn't been for his cultural background. She'd made him look good on the stand, his facial wounds suggesting victim rather than accused. He'd put on a real performance for the jurors. Given them shocked when he'd found out that Bones had been kidnapping street kids. Given them saddened when the police thought that he might have had something to do with it. Given them outraged when recounting how a rogue detective had beat him to within an inch of his life.

Hunter had watched the trial unfold with a growing sense of unease. Rebecca Finch was a hotshot. A real go-getter. But while there was little doubt she was winning the battle, she

hadn't yet won the war. Thus far, the prosecution had been hampered by the fact that all of Montero's associates had developed a sudden case of amnesia. Nobody had a bad word to say about the Salvadorian. Nobody, that is, except Bones, the three-hundred-pound paedophile who'd left more than enough evidence at the steelworks to seal his fate. Bones was the guy who had the most to gain from cutting a deal. Bones was up next on the witness stand. The tide was about to turn.

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