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Written by Daniel Blake

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DANIEL BLAKE

City of Sins

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PROLOGUE

December 26th

Khao Lak, Thailand

The sea ran back down the beach.

Franco Patrese felt the warm sand between his toes and smiled. There might be better places to be in the world right now, but none sprang to mind. It was sunny and hot, he'd spent the last six nights with an English girl who had the dirtiest laugh and nicest smell of anyone he'd ever met, and the most strenuous task he faced today was sorting out the precise sequence of swimming, sunbathing, lunch, beer and sex.

Exactly two weeks ago, Patrese had sat in a Pittsburgh hospital room and listened to a murderer's confession. It had been the culmination of a case which had consumed him for months and taken with it much of his faith in human nature. Exhausted and traumatized, he'd searched online for last-minute holidays, and ended up among the palm trees here in Khao Lak.

The first week had been an open-water diving course – a refresher course, in Patrese's case, as he'd done a lot of diving in his youth but hadn't been for a few years now. It was there that he'd met Katie, the English girl currently asleep in his beachfront hotel room. They'd dived to reefs and

wrecks, swum with Technicolor rainbows of marine life: cube boxfish dotted in yellow and black, nudibranches of solar orange, shrimp banded in Old Glory red and white.

Now Patrese had another week in which to do the square root of nothing. For the first time in months, perhaps longer, he felt – well, not exactly happy, given everything which had happened back in Pittsburgh, but certainly carefree. Tension was leaching like toxins from his body with every day that passed.

He kept walking toward the sea, waiting for the next wave to roll up the sand and lap round his ankles like the licking of an eager puppy.

The water continued to retreat, almost as though it were playing a game with him. Through one wave cycle, then another, and still it receded.

Patrese's brain was so firmly in neutral that it took him a few moments to realize how unusual this was.

In the shallows, swimmers laughed in amazement as the water drained around them. Tourist canoes were left stranded on ropes suddenly slack; beach vendors picked up fish writhing on the sand. Patrese heard questioning voices, saw shoulders shrugged. No one had ever seen such a thing, it seemed.

He had.

A Discovery Channel program, he thought, or maybe National Geographic. They'd reconstructed a historic earthquake – Lisbon, that was it, sometime in the eighteenth century – with CGI effects, talking heads, and a narrator whose voice had been set firmly to 'doom'. The program had shown many of Lisbon's residents fleeing to the waterfront to escape fires and falling debris in the city center. From the docks, they'd seen the sea recede so far and fast that it had exposed all the cargo lost and wrecks forgotten over the centuries.

And after that . . .

'Tsunami!' Patrese shouted. 'Tsunami!'

A couple of people looked curiously at him. Perhaps they thought he was calling for a lost dog. A lobster-colored Englishman in a black-and-white soccer shirt clapped and began to sing, 'Toon Army! Toon Army!'

A posse of Germans were twenty yards away. Patrese ran over to them.

'Move! You've got to move!'

'Hey!' One of the Germans clapped him on the shoulder. 'Chill out, man.'

'There's a tsunami coming!'

'Tsunami?'

'Tidal wave.'

The Germans looked out at the ocean. The water was a carpet of azure as far as they could see.

'I don't see no tidal wave,' said the shoulder clapper.

They all looked at Patrese with a sort of benevolent wariness, clearly bracketing him as slightly demented but probably harmless.

'It's coming, I tell you,' Patrese insisted.

'Whatever you're on, man, can you give me some?'

'Please leave us alone now,' said one of the German women.

Patrese opened his mouth to say something else, but the Germans were already turning away from him. He kept moving, telling everyone he could find: leave the beach, go inland, get somewhere high. Some people packed up their stuff without a word and did what he said. Some ignored him or feigned incomprehension. Some, the smart ones, took off to other parts of the beach and began to spread the word.

A white crescent on the horizon now, awesome in its grace and beauty. For a moment even Patrese stood spell-bound, watching as the crescent began to grow.

Then he ran.

Behind him, the tsunami reared up, an angry cobra of seawater. It flipped a fishing boat over and swallowed it whole. Urgent voices round Patrese, a dozen different languages and all saying the same thing: *Move, run, keep going.*

Katie was standing at the entrance to the hotel, wearing one of Patrese's T-shirts over her bikini. Her hair was tousled, and her eyes were still bleary with sleep.

'What the hell's going on?' she said.

Patrese grabbed her without breaking stride. 'Move. Come with me.'

'Franco, what the fuck . . .?'

'Just do it!' He had to shout to be heard above the roaring.

The tsunami smashed through the swimmers who hadn't managed to get ashore in time and raced up the beach with murderous intent. It was every monster from every nightmare bundled together and made real; surging into the hotel, devouring whole rooms in seconds, tearing husbands from wives and children from parents.

Water all around Patrese and in him, holding him up and dragging him down. Water does not strive. It flows in the places men reject. Chest and spine pressed vice tight and harder still, a balloon expanding from within. Bubbles around his head and ringing beyond heart thumps in his ears; air, life itself, scurrying away into mocking oblivion. The camera's aperture of consciousness closing in, light shrinking from the edges, dim through flashes of jagged crystals. Thoughts slowing, panic receding, resignation, acceptance, dulled contentment, blue gray flowing around, sounds gone, and this is how it ends, this is it, just let go and slide away, like falling about in a green field in early summer.

Then suddenly the water went out and the air came in; coughing, spluttering, frenzied inhaling, man's reflex to survive. Patrese opened his eyes and saw that the tsunami

was gone, pulling itself back out of the hotel and down the beach. Bodies span like sticks in the surge. Patrese felt a wall at each shoulder, and realized he'd been pinned in a corner, facing away from the beach. Blind chance. Anywhere else in the room, he'd have been swept straight back out to sea.

From the dining room upstairs came voices, giddy and shrill with relief. Patrese climbed slime-slippery steps and looked around the room. Two dozen people, he reckoned: the quick ones, the lucky ones.

Katie wasn't among them.

New Orleans, LA

It could have been very romantic. Private room in one of the city's most expensive restaurants, hard on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Just the two of them: him handsome in a swarthy, weathered way, not quite yet ruined by the years; she with skin the color of barely milked coffee under an orange-and-black madras headdress. They wouldn't have been young lovers, that was for sure, but it was anyone's guess as to exactly how old they were: they weren't the kind of people to keep their original birth certificates. The best estimates put her somewhere in her late fifties and him half a decade older. Whatever the truth, they weren't saying.

It could have been very romantic, were it not for the four men who stood outside the private room – two of them hers, two his, all of them armed – and were it not also for the FBI surveillance van which sat at the far end of the parking lot, listening in through the microphone attached to the underside of the wine bucket. The Bureau had guessed the room would be swept for listening devices before the diners arrived, but not after that. They'd guessed right. Now all the listeners needed was something incriminating; something they could hear and, even better, something they could

record. These were two big fish, and the Bureau desperately wanted to net them.

The male fish was Balthazar Ortiz, a senior member of Mexico's Los Zetas drug syndicate. Los Zetas were somewhere between a faction of the Gulf Cartel and a private army of their own. The organization was full of former Mexican special forces soldiers like Ortiz, and they were ruthlessly good at what they did. Los Zetas had sprung two dozen of their comrades from jail somewhere in Mexico a couple of months back; they'd killed the new police chief of Nuevo Laredo six hours after he'd taken office.

And *she* was Marie Laveau, one of the kingpins – queenpins? – of the New Orleans underworld. In particular, she was Queen of the Lower Ninth, a hardscrabble district perched at the corner where the Mississippi met the Industrial Canal. The Lower Ninth, uneasy by day and terrifying by night, reeked of poverty and drugs. It was overwhelmingly black, of course; that went without saying, that was just the way it was in this city.

The original Marie Laveau had lived in New Orleans in the nineteenth century, and had styled herself the Voodoo Queen. A hairdresser by trade, she'd also claimed to be an oracle, an exorcist, a priestess, and much more. For every known fact about her life, there were a hundred myths. So too with this one, the current Marie Laveau. She claimed to be not just a descendant of the original but the very reincarnation of her. She also styled herself the Voodoo Queen, but with the proviso that the spirit of the Voodoo Queen was immortal; she was only the temporary guardian of it.

Marie gestured across the shimmering darkness of the water. In the distance, headlights slid along the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway, the twin-span interstate bridge which connected the city to the north side of the lake.

'The second Marie Laveau – daughter of the original – she

was conducting a ceremony on the lake when a storm came up. Swept her out into the middle of the lake. She stayed in the water five days. When they found her, she didn't even have exposure.'

Ortiz nodded. 'Shall we get to business?'

Marie sighed, as if his lack of interest in small talk was somehow discourteous. 'If you like.'

'Now, I don't know how you did it before, with my, er, predecessor . . .'

'Just like we're doing it now.'

'Good. That's good.'

'Round about this time, every year. See how the arrangement's gone the past twelve months, see how we want it to go for the next twelve.'

'OK. And the arrangement; how is it for you?'

'The arrangement's not the problem.'

'Then what is the problem?'

'You.'

'Me?'

'You. You're the problem.'

The folds of Marie's green kaftan seemed to shift and rearrange themselves, and suddenly she was holding a Magnum Baby Eagle pistol with an extended barrel to accommodate the suppressor on its end.

Ortiz just about had time to look astonished before Marie shot him straight through the heart.

Interlude

Patrese stayed in Khao Lak for three weeks after the tsunami. Every day of those three weeks, from before dawn to after dark, he worked with a frenzy born of knowing one sure thing: that once he stopped, he'd never start again.

He helped carry corpses – one of them Katie's – to warehouses stacked to the ceiling with coffins, body bags and cadavers. He helped dig through rubble with his bare hands, dragging bodies out into the open and off for whatever dignified burial their families could give them. He helped pin photographs of the lost and missing on walls; he listened to the impotent bewilderments of each newly arrived wave of relatives. He helped pile debris into trucks, and helped drive those trucks to landfill sites. He helped aid workers hand out food, helped doctors distribute medicines, helped hammer up walls and roofs for makeshift shelters.

He helped everyone but himself, knowing that he could wait.

And at the end of those three weeks, he suddenly knew it was time to go. There were more people helping with the reconstruction than were strictly needed, and they were beginning to get in each other's way. Hardened professional

aid workers were scorning fresh-faced Western volunteers as 'disaster tourists'; locals were chafing at soldiers who ordered them around.

The night before Patrese left, he was taken to see Panupong Wattana. Wattana was five foot two on a good day, always immaculately turned out in what seemed an endless rota of lightweight suits, and he'd been around Khao Lak pretty much every day since the tsunami: giving interviews to the world's media, glad-handing those unfortunate souls who'd lost everything, and generally strutting around like some latter-day Napoleon. As far as Patrese could make out, Wattana was a hybrid of politician and businessman. Clearly, the two roles were seen as complementary, even indivisible. Equally clearly, the concept of a conflict of interest was a very remote one round these parts.

'The great Stakhanovite!' Wattana exclaimed, clasping Patrese's hand in both of his own. 'I have heard much about you; the American who works like a Soviet!'

Patrese mumbled something noncommittal about just doing his bit.

'Come, come, Mr Patrese. You are too modest, and we all know it. I just want to thank you on behalf of the people of Khao Lak, of Takua Pa district, of Phang Nga province, of Thailand itself . . .'

Patrese half-wondered whether Wattana was going to keep on, rather as Patrese himself had addressed envelopes when a child: name, street, city, country, earth, galaxy, universe.

' . . . and to tell you that if you ever need anything in America, three of my sons are there, and I've instructed them specifically to do anything you ask.'

'Where are they based?' Patrese asked, more out of politeness than a genuine desire to know.

'Johnny's in Baltimore. Tony, New Orleans. Mikey, San Diego.'

Johnny, Tony, Mikey – damn, Patrese thought, they sound more Italian than I do.

‘Well, I’m in Pittsburgh, but if I ever go visit any of those places, I’ll be sure to look them up.’

The Bureau might not have caught Marie discussing anything concrete about her drugs business – the ‘arrangement’ she’d spoken about could have meant anything – but they’d got something better: audio evidence of a murder. The cough of the suppressed pistol hadn’t been loud enough to carry outside the room, so neither Marie’s bodyguards nor Ortiz’ had heard; but it was clearly audible on the surveillance tape.

Back-up had been there inside three minutes; barreling through astonished diners into the back of the restaurant, shouting at the bodyguards not even to fucking think about it, and into the private room, where Marie was sitting calmly across the table from a very dead Ortiz.

The surveillance might have been a Bureau operation, but the murder squarely and clearly belonged to the New Orleans Police Department. Homicide detective Selma Fawcett took charge of the investigation. Selma – named after the Alabama city of civil rights movement fame – was black, which didn’t make her a minority in the NOPD, and female, which did.

Short of actually catching Marie with a smoking gun, this seemed to Selma pretty much as clear-cut as cases went. Marie was so guilty, she made OJ look innocent.

Under Louisiana law, murder in the first was reserved for killings with aggravated circumstances. Since none of those circumstances applied here – there’d been no kidnap, rape, burglary, robbery, and the victim hadn’t been a member of law enforcement – Marie could only be charged with second-degree murder, which in turn meant the maximum sentence she could receive was life rather than death.

That suited Selma fine. She'd seen firsthand what Marie's kind of drugs did to people, and if the last, best option was putting Marie inside to the end of her days, then that would have to do. Selma was less keen on the fact that the second-degree charge allowed Marie to be released on bail – \$500,000 bail, to be precise – but since there was little Selma could do about that, she tried not to let it bother her too much.

The world and his wife grandstanded on this one. The Bureau trumpeted the success of their surveillance operation. The police department pointed to the speed of their officers' response and the efficiency of their investigators. The assistant district attorney took personal charge of the prosecution. Even the state governor himself went on television to restate Louisiana's commitment to drug-free streets. Impressively, he even managed to get all that out with a straight face.

Marie said she wanted a quick trial, as was her right. She also said she wanted to defend herself. This, too, was her right. She started to keep a tally of everyone who quoted to her the maxim about a man who is his own lawyer having a fool for a client.

Trial date was set for late June; and pretty much everyone who came across Marie said that, for a woman facing the prospect of life imprisonment, she seemed about as concerned as someone putting the cat out for the night.

It was ten below freezing when Patrese arrived back in Pittsburgh, and the welcome he got at police headquarters wasn't a whole lot warmer. He'd worked there almost a decade, he'd always thought of himself as fairly popular, yet pretty much not a single person asked how he was, said it was good to have him back, suggested they go for a beer. They must have known about the tsunami: even the most inward-looking of America's TV networks couldn't have ignored it. They just didn't seem to care.

Patrese knew why, of course. The case which had so consumed him had done for his partner, Mark Beradino. Beradino had lost his career and more because of it, and since Beradino had been a legend in the department, and since the department didn't like to see a legend brought low, they'd looked around for someone to blame. Patrese was clearly that someone. That this was unfair – Beradino had brought all the bad luck and trouble on himself – was irrelevant. A scapegoat, a sacrificial lamb, had been sought, and Patrese was its name.

There'd been a time, perhaps as recently as a month ago, when Patrese would have said 'screw the lot of you' and put up with it until people came to their senses. But as he walked through the endless institutional corridors, catching snatches of discussion about the Steelers' upcoming championship game in Foxborough, he realized that he simply couldn't be bothered. He'd just spent three weeks among people who really had lost everything. The static he was getting now seemed so petty in comparison.

He found an empty meeting room and dialed his old college buddy Caleb Boone, now in charge of the FBI's Pittsburgh office.

'Franco! Man, am I glad to hear from you! Been trying you for weeks.'

'Caleb, you want to grab a beer?'

'No.'

'No?'

'No. I want to grab many beers.'

Patrese laughed, relieved. 'I believe that's the recognized international signal for a serious FatHeads session.'

'I believe it is. Seven?'

'Sounds good. And listen; we can talk about this more when we're there, but I was wondering . . . I was wondering if the Bureau has any vacancies. For a cop.'

‘Vacancies? In the Pittsburgh field office?’

‘No. In any field office *apart* from Pittsburgh.’

The FatHeads session indeed turned out to be serious; seriously liquid and seriously long. Patrese stumbled to bed sometime nearer dawn than midnight, and trod gingerly through the next day as a result. He was just about feeling human again by the time he went round to his sister Bianca’s for dinner, and for a few hours lost himself in the uncomplicated and riotous warmth of her own family’s love for him; her briskly efficient doctoral clucking, her husband Sandro’s watchful concern, and the endless energy and noise of their three kids.

‘Here,’ Bianca said suddenly, as they were clearing away. ‘Meant to give you this.’

She reached up to the highest shelf and pulled down a small jar. There was some kind of fabric inside, Patrese saw. It looked old and frayed.

‘What’s this?’ he said.

‘It’s your caul. I found it while packing up Mum and Dad’s stuff.’ Their parents had been killed in a car crash a few months before.

‘Funny thing to keep around the place.’

‘Mom, what’s a caul?’ said Gennaro, Bianca’s youngest.

‘Some babies are born with a membrane covering their face and head.’

‘Yeeuch!’

‘Not “yeeuch”, honey. It’s perfectly natural; it’s just part of the, er, the bag which holds babies inside their moms’ tummies. Uncle Franco was one of those babies. And having a caul is special.’

‘Why’s it special?’

‘Lots of reasons. If you have a caul, it can mean you’re psychic . . .’

'I wish,' Patrese muttered.

' . . . or you can heal people, or you'll travel all your life and never tire, or –'

Bianca stopped suddenly and clapped her hand to her mouth.

'What?' Patrese said.

She spoke through her hand. 'It doesn't matter.'

'Tell me.'

She took her hand away, put it on his shoulder, and looked him squarely in the eye.

'It means you'll never drown.'

Boone rang as Patrese was driving back home.

'This a good time to talk, buddy?'

'Er . . . sure.'

'You OK? You sound a little, er, distracted.'

Patrese glanced at the caul jar on the passenger seat. 'No. Just driving.'

'OK. You asked about the Bureau? Got a name for you: Wyndham Phelps.'

Patrese laughed. 'Sounds like someone from *Gone with the Wind*.'

'Good Southern name. I told him all about you, and he wants to meet with you.'

'Where's he at?'

'He heads the field office in New Orleans.'