

# THE GOOD KILL

*A Killian Lebon Novel*

Kurt Brindley

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Kurt Brindley  
Visit my website at [www.kurtbrindley.com](http://www.kurtbrindley.com)

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# SAMPLE

NOT FOR RESALE

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*For all the innocent ones who must suffer the evils  
this indifferent world blindly begets them*

# PART ONE

*He was ashamed of the casual arrogance with which he had presumed to scurry about creation. From the bottom of his heart, he concurred in the moral necessity of his annihilation.*

Robert Stone, DOG SOLDIERS



## CHAPTER ONE

The killer, large and powerful and full of a violent yet calculated rage, dragged his mark by the greasy hair from the bedroom all the way down the suburban Ohio home's two flights of stairs to its dank, unfinished basement. The killer was unconcerned throughout the struggling descent that the sleeping household would be awakened by the screaming oaths of murderous retribution and the loud thumping and banging within the stairwells as the mark tried desperately to free himself from the killer's grip. Prior to his abduction of the mark, the killer had visited the bedrooms of the house's other four occupants – two young women, one in her late teens and one in her early twenties, and two young girls, one in her mid-teens, and one yet prepubescent – and held a cloth soaked in homemade chloroform to their four sleeping faces, gently sending them into an even deeper level of unconsciousness, a place where, he hoped, the nightmare of the reality they had been living in did not haunt them.

Once in the basement, the killer wrapped his flailing and cursing mark in a vice-like chokehold and put another cloth soaked in the colorless, sweet-smelling liquid anesthetic firmly over the man's sweaty red face, holding it there until the killer was certain his victim was knocked out completely so as to give himself the time he needed to prepare for what was to come next. Thirteen-minutes later, he broke a packet of smelling salts under the unconscious man's nose. The ammonia expanded the blood vessels within the nostrils, allowing an instant increase of oxygen to hit the brain, jolting the mark awake as if he had been injected with an adrenaline shot straight to the heart. The mark began coughing violently and it took a moment for him to work through his heightened state of confusion before he realized that he was now naked and that his chest, forearms, thighs, and ankles were bound securely with duct tape to one of the wooden armchairs from the dining room. He struggled frantically against the bindings taped tight to his bare skin. Eyes wide and chest heaving, he looked like a condemned, unrepentant psychopath trying to free himself from the fate of the electric chair.

When the killer stepped out from the shadows and allowed the mark to see for the first time the full scope of his six-foot, five-inch, 245-pound muscle-hardened frame dressed head to foot all in black – black combat pants and shirt, black combat boots,

black assault gloves, and a black balaclava – the mark froze from fright at what looked to him like an oversized ninja warrior from hell. But what frightened him most wasn't the size of the killer or the black garb of death that he was wearing, what frightened him most was the long, black machete that was strapped diagonally, ominously, to the killer's back.

In his hands the killer held an incongruous blue folder. He opened it and from among all the lined sheets of paper scribbled with hand-written notes, he slid out a sheet of computer paper with several paragraphs typed neatly upon it. He looked over the words on the paper for a moment and then held the sheet in front of the mark's face. In a voice deep, low, and intimidating, he said, "You will read out loud exactly what is written on this paper to this camera." He stepped aside so the mark could see the phone mounted to a tripod behind him. "Comprende, amigo?"

But the mark, used to being the one doing the intimidating and not the other way around, spat at the paper. "Go fuck yourself, pussy," he said in Spanish. "I ain't your mother fucking friend."

In one fluid motion, the killer grabbed the machete from the scabbard on his back and slashed down across the mark's bare, hairless chest. A thin bead of blood oozed out from the diagonal gash. The mark screamed out, more from fright than from pain, and renewed his futile struggle to free himself from the chair.

"Do you know who you're fucking with, you crazy mother fucker?" the mark hollered, still speaking in Spanish.

"Yes, I do, Juan Carlos. Are you now ready to read for me?" the killer asked. "And let me warn you," he continued, pointing the machete at the mark's bloody chest for emphasis, "that if your response is anything but yes, the pain I inflict upon you next will be exceedingly greater than the small scratch you just received."

Juan Carlos was about to speak in defiance; however, with his mouth still open, he paused, looked down at the blade pointing at his chest, and then quickly came to believe in the sincerity of the killer's threat. "Wh-why are you doing this to me?" he asked in a heavily accented English.

*Astaghfirullah!*

The killer sliced off Juan Carlos's right hand at the wrist and it dropped to the cold concrete floor with a smack. Hot blood being carried by the thick ulnar and radial arteries began pulsing out from the severed end of the arm. It all happened so fast; Juan Carlos stared down in awe at the hand lying at his feet as if he didn't recognize it as his. And then came the pain. And then the screams. And then he began flailing in the chair as if he were now actually being electrocuted.

The killer slapped Juan Carlos hard across the face with the back of his gloved hand. Juan Carlos stopped screaming and began gulping for air as if he were drowning.

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“I told you there would be unpleasant consequences if your answer to my question was anything but yes,” the killer said calmly. “So, I’ll ask again, and the same rules apply. Are you now ready to read what’s written on this sheet of paper?”

Juan Carlos’s eyes darted back and forth between the bloody stump at the end of his arm and the masked face of the large man towering over him. “Si – yes, yes! Anything!”

“Good choice,” the killer said. He turned to the tripod and, with a pre-staged piece of duct tape, taped the paper directly beneath the phone. He slid the tripod closer to the mark and then walked behind it. He tapped a finger on the phone and said, “This is yours, right? I got it off the nightstand next to your bed.”

Juan Carlos looked at the phone as if he’d never seen one before. Then, “Yes, yes. It is mine,” he said, now eager to please his captor.

The killer pressed the power button to wake the phone. “What’s its passcode?”

Juan Carlos didn’t answer. His face was pale, and he seemed as if he were settling into shock. The killer walked quickly up to him and again smacked him in the face. “What is your phone’s passcode, Juan Carlos?”

Juan Carlos came to and sputtered, “It’s... I-I can’t re—” His bladder released its contents. The urine soaked into the padded seat cushion and ran down his leg to pool on the floor with the blood. This panicked him even more.

“Wait! One nine seven three, he said rapidly in Spanish,” relieved he was able to remember the code.

“Really? The year you were born?” the killer said. “Not very good security, Juan Carlos.” The killer raised the tripod so that the paper was slightly higher than Juan Carlos’s line of sight. He entered the passcode and then opened the phone’s camera app. He then adjusted the focus until the entirety of the seated Juan Carlos filled the frame.

“When I press the record button, you begin reading exactly what is written on the paper. You don’t look at me, you don’t look anywhere except at the words on the paper. Do you understand me, Juan Carlos?”

“Si,” the defeated man said. His voice was barely audible.

“If you look anywhere else other than at the paper, or if you do not read everything exactly as it is written, I will remove more parts of your person without question every time you do not comply. Do you understand me, Juan Carlos?”

“Si.”

“Good,” the killer said. “Then let’s get started.” He tapped the record button on the camera app and then nodded to the doomed man for him to begin.

After another brief moment of uncontrollable sobbing, Juan Carlos pulled himself together and began to read.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BEFORE

First there were sounds, warbled, slow motion psychotic sounds, sounds as if they were being transmitted through a liquid and were being received attenuated, just beyond the realm of discernibility. As the maddening sounds swarmed and swirled and tormented, a realization of the blackness came next, a thick, fluid, eternal blackness, the viscosity of which was goo-like and suffocating. Within this blackness, the concept of time, too, became slowly apparent; however, it was a time without any context of past or present; its utility incomprehensible.

As he slowly became aware of himself, it was unclear to him how long he had been held captive within the turmoil and confinement of the blackness. It could have been one minute or one day or one hundred days, he had no way of knowing. He could, however, feel that he was on the verge of an existential precipice within this void of uncertainty; though, it was yet unclear to him whether the precipice verged on life or verged on death.

When the light came – first as a galaxy of shiny, sensual pinpricks, then, all at once, as one starry fireball of a flash that consumed the dark in an instant – with it came the pain. And the pain, he soon realized, came from pressure, a burning, intolerable pressure that felt as if it were contracting the contents inside his head, while the head, itself, was expanding outwardly. It was as if the pressure were attempting to squeeze his brains into a mushy pulp while simultaneously working to blow out his skull and scatter it into a million boney shards.

Finally, as the pressure contracted and expanded within his head with machine-like savagery and precision, scattered remembrances began taking shape and forming into disconnected memories, memories horrific and haunting, memories that erupted in his mind as explosively and as deadly as any IED.

*Astaghfirullah! Astaghfirullah! Astaghfirullah...*

## THE GOOD KILL

\* \* \*

The attending physician came in after a nurse and two aides had worked hard to calm him down. The doctor read through his chart for a moment at the nurse's mobile computer station near the door and then came over, stood next to his bed, her hands tucked into the deep pockets of her lab coat. When she introduced herself as Doctor Nadia Goran, he looked at her in an almost accusingly manner. She met his gaze directly with her large dark brown eyes. Her smile was warm but professional. Her hair, running black and straight down her back, shined and stood out in stark contrast to the whiteness of the coat.

He could not be certain where she was from – he thought perhaps he detected the slightest of an accent – or what her heritage was, but he had fought with a Kurdish soldier in Syria named Goran before being transferred to Mosul to assist the Iraqi forces in driving out ISIS. Thinking of Mosul brought back more of the memories, and with them came more of the pain; a different kind of pain from the physical one pounding inside his head, but it was pain, nonetheless.

The doctor, standing there at his bedside, confident, educated, professional, perhaps could have been, had there been just the slightest tweak in history, one of the girls who haunted him. And, just as she could have been one of those girls had the circumstances been different, conversely, one of those girls, or all of them even, could have just as easily been her. But history was as it was, leaving Doctor Goran standing alive and safe before him, and the girls... dead. Brutally and forever dead.

*Astaghfirullah! Astaghfirullah! Astaghfirullah...*

Having no idea the torment her presence was causing him, Doctor Goran, without emotion or inflection, began to explain his medical condition to him.

*What we know, Senior Chief, is that you have experienced severe physical trauma to both the heart and brain. What we don't know is how much if any psychological trauma you are or will be experiencing as a result. We will need your help over time in answering that question, because all trauma must be considered equally when developing your treatment protocols.*

She went on to tell him how, during the medical evacuation flight from Iraq to Joint Base Andrews, the Critical Care Air Transport Team had to induce him into a coma to try to stop his brain from swelling from the injury it had received from the blast – *the severity of which, I'm sorry to say, will be life-changing and everlasting*; and she told him how the team then had worked to remove the seven pieces of shrapnel that had penetrated through his back and into his lungs, collapsing them and nearly suffocating him; and she told him how, while trying to remove a tiny piece of shrapnel that had

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pierced into the back of his heart, they had made the determination that it was too risky a procedure and had elected to leave it in place; and she told him how, when he finally made it to Walter Reed, another team of doctors had to work eleven more hours to remove all of the fifty-seven pieces of shrapnel that were found embedded within his back and neck; and then she told him how this morning, nearly six weeks after he had been induced into a coma, they felt he was now well enough to be brought back out of it.

She told him everything that had happened medically to him, but to him it all meant nothing. After what he had witnessed in Mosul, nothing mattered to him anymore.

*Astaghfirullah...*

## CHAPTER THREE

Lars Blackman, or Black, as those employees and frequent customers of Fantasy Plus less opposed to his cracker-assed presence called him, sat in his cramped office leaning back in his undersized and outdated chair with his size fifteens propped up on his battered desk tapping to the heavy beat of the dance music as it grinded out its irrepressible bassline throughout every inch of the North Baltimore gentlemen's club. His large, toe-tapping shoes were blocking his view of the two, twenty-four-inch computer screens showing the live video feeds of the club's eight security cameras, feeds that were his responsibility to be monitoring. It didn't matter that he couldn't see the images on the computer screens though, because his attention was invested solely on his phone's screen as he played a high-stakes game of Texas Hold 'em.

After receiving no help from the flop for his lifeless hole cards, he was in the process of deciding whether to open the pot with a half-hearted bluff or to just check his bet to see how his opponents responded when a notification popped up at the top of his phone. He had received a text message from Gary Schneider, his partner from his brief time spent with the Baltimore City Police Department. He quickly checked the bet and then tapped on the notification to open the message to see what his former partner had to say.

yo black, you seen this video yet? fucker's blowing up the net. sick shit just like you like it - gs.

Blackman shook his head in disappointment. He was hoping for something substantive, like an invite to lunch or drinks where he could casually work the aspiring detective for intel about any ongoing investigations or gossip within the department. But instead, it was nothing but a link to another viral video. He would love to be able to tell Schneider to stop sending him that kind of bullshit, but he couldn't. He was still a pariah to the department, so he needed to keep in the good grace of the detective and the other few remaining contacts he had left within it. To be able to respond appropriately to the text in the hope his follow-up might lead to a get-together, he

reluctantly clicked on the link in the message, assuming it would take him to some lame revenge porn video or worse.

It turned out to be worse. Much worse. The link led him to a website called 4chan, a subversive, highly decadent underground site where anyone could post anonymously to its image and video message boards. When the video began he couldn't tell what was happening at first due to the low lighting, but he soon realized that what he was seeing was the recording of a Hispanic-looking man bound naked to a chair. The man was crying and his head hung low to his chest, where, diagonally across it, blood was oozing out from a long, thin slash of a wound. The end of his right arm was a bloody stump. Its missing hand was lying lifeless on the floor, its fingers reaching out as if beckoning the viewer to help.

A dim light lit up the area around the man, leaving the rest of the room dark and shadowed. When the man finally calmed his sobbing, he lifted his head to begin speaking slowly, hesitantly, into the camera with a heavily accented English. After a moment Blackman realized that the unfortunate man seemed to be reading a prepared statement.

*My name is Juan Carlos Rios Vasquez. I am forty-three-years old and I am from Veracruz, Mexico. I have been living illegally in various parts of the United States for over ten years and I now live at 1238 White Charm Drive, Logansburg, Ohio, which is forty miles southwest of Columbus. I am recording this video to confess to my crimes and to... and to receive my just punishment for them.*

Vasquez stopped reading and sobbed. Snot ran down into his mouth. He tried to wipe it away with his bare shoulder, but he couldn't quite reach it.

*I have been a soldier in the Mártires por la Santa Muerte cartel since I was seventeen. In addition to selling and distributing narcotics for the cartel, my job is to traffic and pimp young women and girls that are brought into America illegally, mostly from Mexico and other Central American countries. As of now, I am the pimp for four young women and girls. The oldest is twenty-three. The youngest is eleven. They are all my sexual slaves and I sell their services to other Latino immigrants who live and work in the area.*

*If anyone outside the Latino community were to ask about the girls, I would tell them that the oldest is my wife, the second oldest is her sister, and the two youngest are my daughters. Within the Latino community, no one would ever ask about the girls, other than to purchase their services, nor would anyone within it dare report us to the authorities. They know that if they do, the Mártires cartel will deal with them and their families, wherever they may be, in terrible ways.*

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As he paused to catch his breath, his eyes darted back and forth from the camera to something off screen to his right.

*To ensure the complete submission and cooperation of the girls, I and other soldiers rape them regularly and get them hooked on heroin and other drugs before working them as prostitutes. When they are no longer making us money, we sell them to other gangs or traffickers. And if we are unable to sell them, we kill them and dispose of their bodies. There is always a high turnover of girls because there are always fresh girls looking to enter the country illegally. And since they are brought into the States illegally, no one in the States is looking for them because no one knows they are missing.*

He stopped reading to try to find some saliva for his dry throat.

*I know that I am an evil man and that what I have done is wrong. I ask that you all pray for the lives of the many young women and girls I have ruined and killed, either through my own deeds or the deeds of others on my behalf. And finally, I ask for God's mercy on my soul, for I am now ready to—*

He looked off screen and shook his head and pleaded to whomever it was who was forcing him to make the confession.

*No, no. I cannot read it. Please don't make me say it..*

His panicked eyes followed the movement of something unseen to the viewer. But what he saw seemed to convey a message that convinced him to continue reading. He took in a deep breath, let it out, and then looked directly at the camera and opened his mouth to begin. But no words came out. Instead, he began to cry again until, finally, through his sobs he spoke his final words.

*I ask for God's mercy on my soul, for I am now ready to die for my sins.*

With his back to the camera, a large man wearing a balaclava and dressed in all black stepped smoothly into the frame and swung a machete at Vasquez's neck as if he were swinging at a fastball, all while screaming out something incomprehensible to Blackman, something Arabic-sounding. Fucking raghead terrorists finally making their way onto the homeland, was the thought that ran through the security manager's mind. The blow from the killer's explosive swing severed the criminal's head completely from his body, such was the force. After the deadly follow through the killer stepped back out of the frame, allowing the viewer to briefly witness Juan Carlos Rios Vasquez's

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decapitated head lying on the floor next to his chair-bound corpse, its pained eyes still open and looking up toward a heaven he most likely would never know.

And then the video ended abruptly.

## CHAPTER FOUR

**A**fter the card reader scanned his badge and the gates rolled opened, Sean McKnight pulled his Crystal White Cadillac CT6 sedan into the Half Moon Island Resort executive staff parking lot and parked next to a black Cadillac Escalade ESV. With the engine still running, the stereo pounding out a Slayer classic, and the air conditioner blasting, McKnight took a drag off his non-filtered American Spirit and then inspected the butt barely protruding from between his thick, yellow-stained fingers. Determining the cigarette still had some life left in it, he took one final drag from it and then, with smoke spewing from his nostrils, he took a final pull from his venti Redeye, a twenty-ounce blonde roast boosted with a shot of espresso. He stuffed the butt down the lid's drink hole and listened for the satisfying sound of the singe as the burning tobacco struck the dregs at the bottom of the cup.

The unseasonably hot, moist, brackish air blowing off Lake Borgne, which now, thanks to Katrina, was not so much a lake anymore but an extension of the Gulf of Mexico, hit him hard as he unfolded his six-foot, seven-inch, 280-pound frame out from the air-conditioned car. He opened the back door, unzipped the garment bag hanging from the hanger hook, and pulled out a dark blue sports coat from the bag. He shook it out in the fresh air, and then sniffed it to make sure it didn't smell like cigarette smoke. Shrugging the jacket on over his large shoulders, he walked around the resort's helicopter pad and out to where the dewy grass met the narrow beach with its white powdered sand.

As he stared out on the peaceful lake, he took out a red bandana from his back pocket and mopped off the glistening sweat beads atop his brown, clean-shaven head and dripping from his thick, black-bearded face before donning a pair of Oakley Half Jacket 2.0 wraparound sunglasses. Several miles off the manufactured shoreline lay the Half Moon Island. Shaped less like a half-moon and more like a bird with a broken wing, the island was home to and namesake of the luxurious Half Moon Island Resort. From where he stood, the expansive, thirty-two-floor hotel and casino, constructed in the shape of a grand and silvery half-moon, looked to him like nothing more than a glistening blip on the water. A thousand yards or so beyond the island, just off the horizon, he could

just barely see a single tiny, floating spec that he knew to be *The White Majestic*, a 300-foot Benetti luxury yacht belonging to Louis DeBlanc, the resort's owner and his boss. DeBlanc had received special permission from the New Orleans Port Authority to moor his yacht to one of their single point moorings, a large buoy typically reserved for oil tankers too large to make it all the way into port.

He pulled out a pair of compact binoculars from inside his coat pocket, pushed his sunglasses up to the top of his head, and took a closer look at the yacht. He could just make out that the resort's helicopter was still wheels down on the sundeck helipad. This meant to him that he had more than enough time to smoke another square before his employer arrived. He lit up and, with his binoculars, scanned the dank-smelling bayou just to the east of him in search for alligators.

The resounding blast of a steam whistle drew his attention back to his location to a scene beyond the rock barrier separating the executive staff parking lot from the acre-sized lot reserved for the resort's customers and non-executive staff. There, they could dine at the Half Moon Island Restaurant, shaped, of course, like a silvery half-moon, while waiting to board one of the resort's three nineteenth-century replica steamboats for a fifty-five-minute shuttle ride out to the island. He saw that one of the boats, full of happy vacationers looking to gamble away their hard-earned cash, was just getting underway, its large paddlewheel slowly beginning to churn at its stern. Nearly all the people on the boat, he saw, were either crowded on the main deck hitting the slots or were crowded on the upper deck around the ferry's bar, hitting the complimentary booze. Few were on the outside decks enjoying the view.

It wasn't long before the gates to the parking lot opened and another Cadillac sedan came speeding in. Unlike McKnight's white CT6, this one was the newer model CTS-V colored Stellar Black Metallic. It pulled into the spot next to McKnight's car. A big man, but nowhere near as big as McKnight, got out of the car and began walking toward the beach.

"'Bout time your happy ass got here, rookie," McKnight hollered out, his deep voice booming loud over the sound of the wind rushing in off the gulf.

Rick, Happy, Henderson flashed a large, white-toothed smile and hollered back, "Big Black Mack Attack McKnight. Holy shit, I have hit the big time now." As Henderson walked toward his new partner, he gathered his long brown hair blowing from the wind and tied it into a sloppy manbun with the hair band that was wrapped around his wrist. He walked up to McKnight and the two colleagues shook hands and folded into a hug.

"Happy, as pretty as you are with that smile and all that hair, I have a hard time believing that you're as badass as everyone says you are," McKnight said.

"Ah, you know me, Big Mack. I'm a lover not a fighter."

"Well, whatever the hell you are, it sure must have impressed Ham for him to bump you up to this detail."

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Henderson laughed. "I'm not sure if you're complimenting me or bragging about yourself."

McKnight laughed with him. "Both work for me." He checked his watch and then looked through the binoculars. "Bird's still on the deck. Must be running late." He popped a fresh cigarette into his mouth and lit it from the nub of his last one. He pinched off the smoldering end of the butt and stamped it out after it fell to the ground. The butt went into his pants pocket.

"Aren't you quite the environmentalist," said Henderson with mock admiration.

McKnight grunted. "I used to just flick the bastards to the ground until Petite Louie figured out they were my brand and almost fired my ass because of it."

Henderson shook his head knowingly. "That little prick's something, isn't he? He drives Ham nuts the way he's always trying to red team his security protocols."

"If you ask me, Ham's always been a little nuts," McKnight said. "Ever hear him tell those fucked up spec op stories from the first Iraq War?"

"Are you kidding me?" Henderson said shaking his head. "Anyone who's ever worked the floor for more than five minutes has heard those crazy ass stories at least once."

"Damn, I sure as hell don't miss working the floor with all those asshole tourists," McKnight said before taking a drag from his cigarette. He exhaled the smoke and took another look through the binoculars. "Okay, wheels are up." He took a series of quick drags on the cigarette and then disposed of it as before while walking up the short, grassy slope to the helipad. "You know what's on today's docket, right?" McKnight asked when they reached the asphalt landing.

"You bet," Henderson said, his voice taking on a serious, operational tone. "After he lands here, we take him to the bank. From the bank, it's to the airport for the hop to Houston to meet with Daddy DeBlanc. From Houston back to the airport, and from the airport to University Medical Center for the dedication ceremony. After the ceremony, back to here for a shuttle to the resort where he'll have his weekly with his managers. And then finally, a quick hop on the bird back to the yacht for the night. Sound about right?"

"Yeah," McKnight said impressed, "except that Houston got bumped to tomorrow so he and his lady will hang out at Royal Street until it's time for the ceremony. And he won't be going back to the yacht. He'll be entertaining some player from Russia at the resort, so he decided to stay overnight at the hotel. Ham called me earlier to let me know the change in plans."

"Damn. I was really looking forward to spending the night on the yacht," Henderson said.

"Don't worry. You'll have plenty of chances. Besides, our rooms in the resort are pretty nice. Not that you'll be seeing too much of yours, rookie, since you'll get the first and last shifts."

“Yeah, yeah,” Henderson said as he grabbed his crotch. “I got your rookie right here you big baldheaded mother fucker.”

McKnight chuckled. “That’s a rookie, too, huh?”

They watched the small dot of a helicopter for a moment. Henderson cleared his throat and said, “Hey, um, I heard that it was you who put the good word in for me with Ham. I really appreciate that, Sean.”

“Ham’s got a big fucking mouth,” McKnight said, pretending to be pissed.

Henderson’s face grew concerned. He was going to say something, but McKnight cut him off.

“But what I said to him really didn’t matter. You proved yourself, Happy. You deserve the bump up.” He nodded toward the cars. “How do you like your new wheels, courtesy of Mr. DeBlanc?”

Henderson’s smile stretched wide. “Dude, that is one badass ride. I’ve never driven anything like it.”

“That’s the CTS-V, right?”

“Damn right it is. All 600 horsepower of her,” Henderson said proudly.

Both men admired the new ride for a few moments before McKnight asked, “You already been through the combat driving course or you still waiting for a slot?”

Henderson threw his head back as if he were having a religious experience. “Holy shit, Mack. That course was off the motherfucking hook, bro. No lie, I have never had so much fun in my life. Totally blew away the army’s program.” Henderson chucked McKnight on the arm affectionately. “Seriously, Mack. Thank you. I won’t let you down, brother.”

McKnight’s eyes narrowed. “Damn right you won’t, ‘cause if you do, I’ll make sure your ass ends up just like Lazlo’s.”

Henderson reflected on that for a moment. “Fuck that. Won’t be me,” he said soberly. “That asshole got exactly what he deserved.”

McKnight nodded in agreement. “Got your piece, right?”

Henderson held open his jacket to show him his pistol secured in its shoulder holster.

McKnight nodded his head in approval. “Glock 19. Nice. Can’t shake the CAG mentality, I see.”

“Hey, man,” Henderson said defensively, patting the sidearm through his jacket. “Can’t go wrong with a Glock. Mother fucker will never let you down.” He nodded at McKnight. “What’re you holding?”

McKnight reached inside his jacket and pulled out a black Desert Eagle .50 AE pistol from his shoulder holster. “All American, baby,” he said as he held it up proudly before the both of them.

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“Dude, that is badass. Love the tiger stripes,” Henderson said stepping in closer to get a better look at it. “Damn, bro, your big ass hand makes even that canon look like a pea shooter.”

“What can I say,” McKnight said still admiring the pistol. “I have presence.”

Henderson laughed and nodded in concurrence. “You know, we got to hit the range ASAP so I can fire off a few rounds with that baby.”

“Sorry, but no one gets to finger this baby’s trigger but me,” McKnight said as he holstered the weapon and turned his attention back to the approaching helicopter.

Henderson followed McKnight’s example of silent reflection only momentarily before saying, “Hey, I heard the boss has a new babe. Have you seen her yet?”

“Oh yeah,” McKnight said. “She is by far his finest piece of ass yet. And he’s had some fine ones.”

“Another black chick, right?”

“Nothing but,” McKnight said as he straightened his collar and smoothed down his shirt. “But I’m not too sure this one will last very long.”

“Why’s that?” Henderson asked in a serious manner.

“Well, DeBlanc’s a strange dude. He buys these young sisters straight from the hood and...” he considered something briefly, “You ever seen that old musical from the Sixties, *My Fair Lady*?”

Henderson shook his head and laughed. “Seriously? Dude, I’m having a hard time imagining your big black ass sitting in front of the tube watching old Hollywood musicals.” You sing along with them, too?”

“Fuck off. Anyway—”

“Okay, I can see it now,” Henderson broke in, laughing as he spoke, “Big Mack sitting on the couch in his underwear and tee-shirt, a big-ass bowl of popcorn on his lap and big-ass fuzzy pink slippers on his big-ass feet, singing along with the TV at the top of his lungs. Dude, you’re fuckin’ killing me.”

“Anyway,” McKnight continued forcibly, “this flick’s about how this old upper-class British dude, played by Rex Harrison, makes a bet with a friend, some other old upper-class British dude played by... Wilfred something or other, that he can turn some poor, dirty cockney girl off the street, played by Audrey Hepburn, into an elegant and proper young lady who could fit right in with their aristocratic society.”

Henderson’s eyes went wide and his head went back in surprise at McKnight’s thorough explanation. “Sounds interesting, Siskel. Or are you Ebert?” he said sarcastically. “So, what the fuck does this flick have to do with *Petite Louie*? Is he going to be singing show tunes to us all day or what?”

McKnight chuckled. “No, thank god. But I’ve been with the little fucker for close to three years now and I’d bet a paycheck that he gets off on trying to turn all these nasty-ass hood girls he’s buying into high-class chicks. Except instead of transforming them

through song and dance like Rex Harrison, he does it through rape and psychological abuse.”

“Damn, dude,” Henderson said. “You’ve really thought this shit through, haven’t you?”

McKnight nodded slowly in sober agreement. “If you’re around long enough to see him go through as many girls as I have, you’ll begin to think about it too.”

“So, what’s the problem with this latest chick then?” Henderson asked with studious interest.

“Well, she’s pretty sharp and seems to have already figured out the role she’s supposed to be playing. Already going around acting like she’s some high-class, queen of the castle bitch. You’ll see. Takes all the fun out of it for DeBlanc.”

McKnight turned from his new partner toward the distant whir of the incoming helicopter. “Okay, it’s almost show time.” He pulled out a set of car keys from his pants pocket and handed them to Henderson. “Pull the Escalade around and get it cooled down.”

As Henderson began trotting off, McKnight hollered out to him. “Hold up. I need you to grab my backpack out of my car and put it in the Escalade.” He fished in his pocket again for another set of keys and tossed them to Henderson.

Henderson pulled the Escalade around and parked it next to the helipad. He left it idling and walked back over to where McKnight stood and handed him back his keys. They watched as the helicopter flew by the island and headed straight toward them.

McKnight gave Henderson a once over and then said loudly, in an effort to speak over the sound of the helicopter bearing down on them, “Okay, rookie, go stand tall next to the Escalade. And try not to drool on DeBlanc’s lady friend while holding the door open for her, got it?”

Henderson laughed and rushed off toward the SUV.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### BEFORE

Diego Santiago stood outside the hospital room and tried to collect himself one last time. He took in a deep breath and slowly released it as he smoothed back his wavy, once black but now mostly gray hair. He then removed his overcoat, shook off the melted snow, and folded it neatly over his left arm. Even though the door to the room was open, he knocked lightly and waited to be invited in. Ever since his days of ministering to hospitalized members of his congregation, he had never been comfortable with walking into a hospital room uninvited. He had great empathy for how exposed and undignified some people felt lying helpless in a hospital bed while so many well-meaning doctors, nurses, technicians, and others walked in and out of the room at will and at all hours of the day.

When there was no answer to his knock, Diego stepped hesitantly into the room. Killian Lebon lay motionless on his back in a hospital bed too small for his large and lengthy frame. Diego stood there waiting to see if Killian would wake and acknowledge him, welcome him. When he didn't, Diego took one of the two metal-framed plastic guest chairs from against the wall near the door over to the bed and set it down quietly. But instead of sitting, he stood next to the bed and studied Killian as he slept. Killian's sandy blond hair, always cut tight on the back and sides and combed neatly over the top, was now thick and wild with a length down to his shoulders. His handsome face and chiseled chin, always ruddy and closely shaved, was now wan and gray and covered with a thick, unruly light brown beard. Feeling disoriented and out of place, Diego sat down heavily in the chair. He could hardly recognize his friend of nearly forty years.

The thought struck him hard. Has it really been so long? he wondered. Has it really been... he had to pause to do the exact calculations... thirty-eight years since Killian's birth? He shook his head in disbelief. It seemed to him just like yesterday that he had performed Killian's sacrament of baptism. It didn't seem possible that it had been thirty-eight years since Branna, she so young and beautiful and still with the expectations of a full life ahead of her, stood before him holding an infant Killian in her

loving arms as he performed those rites. A pang of remorse shot through his heart as he thought about Killian's mother. He shook his head again, this time in sadness. Branna Lebon. Never had he known anyone more devout, or who had loved God as much, or who had worked so hard on His behalf as she. He closed his moistening eyes, folded his hands together, bowed his head, and began to pray.

After a loud space of silence, Killian said, not pleasantly and as if to no one, "The last time I saw you, you were praying."

Diego lifted his head and smiled, but it was a smile not of happiness. "Yes. I remember. You were leaving for yet another tour to Iraq. Prayer was the only protection I could offer you." His voice was soft, meditative, and with only the slightest of accent left to highlight his Mexican upbringing.

Killian scoffed. "Perhaps you should have prayed harder."

Diego leaned in toward the bed and grabbed hold of the side rails. He looked at the broken warrior and smiled a sad, sympathetic smile before saying, "Killian, I'm so, so sorry."

Killian sighed impatiently. "For what? Not praying hard enough? Not protecting me?"

"For that. And for what you've had to suffer," Diego said.

Killian turned to look at his old friend, exposing fully the vast emptiness in his eyes and the thick scars running along the left side of his face and up into the hairline. The eyes, eyes once icy blue in color, eyes intelligent and piercing, now looked dull and gray, as if their color had been washed away and the light within them extinguished.

"What do you know about my suffering, Father?" Killian asked roughly. "Do you think I'm suffering because of my injuries?" Before Diego could respond, Killian startled him by pounding a fist hard into his own chest, right over his heart. "These injuries are nothing. Nothing, do you understand? They have nothing to do with my suffering. All they are to me is just evidence of my failure."

This visit was far from what Diego had expected it to be. Prior to entering Killian's room, a nurse, speaking in grave whispers, had explained to Diego the extent of Killian's injuries, so when he walked into the room and saw him for the first time he was prepared to see a man physically broken. However, what he wasn't prepared to see, this of a man whom he had always known to be of the strongest character and of the soundest mind, was a man so obviously mentally broken as well.

Now was not the time to give Killian the news that had been weighing heavy on his heart for so long, Diego thought to himself. No, he was not about to bring even more suffering upon his dear friend in the state he was in. He stood up. "I'm sorry, Killian. Perhaps—"

"Yes, Father, you've made it very clear how sorry you are for me. I've had quite enough already of your sorrow, thank you."

## THE GOOD KILL

“Please, Killian, I didn’t come here to upset you,” Diego said sadly. “Perhaps I should come back after you’ve had some time to—”

“Some time to what? To get used to the fact that my brain is now a ticking time bomb? Or that one wrong move could release shrapnel into my heart? Well, you know what, Father? I don’t need any time to get used to the fact that I could die at any moment. I look forward to it.”

“Killian, please. Don’t say such things. Look, I can’t imagine what you’ve been through but—”

“No, Father, you cannot imagine,” Killian said as he lay back into his pillow and closed his eyes.

Diego took a deep breath before responding. It was breaking his heart to see his friend like this. “Yes, you’re right, Killian. I can’t imagine. But I would still like to try to understand. To help you in your recovery. You know how much you mean to me.”

After a long pause Killian said wearily, “You’re right, Father. Perhaps you should go.”

The former priest nodded his head in understanding. He put on his overcoat and then left the room, pausing only briefly at the door.

## CHAPTER SIX

Just as Juan Carlos's decapitated head came to a rest on the floor next to his seated corpse, there came a loud banging on the wall in front of Blackman's desk. Blackman dropped his feet to the floor and popped up in his chair with his eyes still transfixed on the snuff video. After it ended, he closed the app and began scanning through the video feeds on the computer monitors. By the second split screen, the one showing the feed of the coverage of the bar area, he knew exactly why his boss was banging on the wall.

"What the fuck is she doing here?" Blackman asked out loud to himself. He grabbed his sport coat hanging off the back of his chair and put it on as he rushed out of his office. Out in the hall, he nodded curtly to T-Rex, the boss's massive nephew standing guard at the door to his uncle's office, who, by comparison, made even the six-foot, four-inch, 235-pound Blackman seem small, and who, in response to Blackman's nod, eyed him suspiciously. Blackman stepped around the bodyguard to enter the office and join the club owner at the expansive, one-way mirror that allowed them to observe the entirety of the club from directly behind the dance floor.

While Jerome Savage was a half-a-foot shorter than his security manager, he had a presence that overcame any gap in height and, as anyone knew who knew anything about the mean streets of Baltimore, his slender build and piercing good looks belied his strength and toughness. On the streets, he was known as the Hollywood Thug Killa, an honorific he earned through both his movie star looks and through his ruthless reputation for the bloody way he would eliminate anyone ignorant enough to stand in the way of his relentless pursuit of wealth and power. His friends and close associates called him Hollywood for short, a privilege which didn't extend to Blackman, despite their years in alliance.

When Blackman joined him at the window, Savage wasn't looking at the three naked women dancing only a few feet away from them on the other side of the mirror; nor was he looking at any of the lustful men lining the sides of the stage and occupying the tables farther back. He was looking beyond them all to the only fully clothed woman in the club sitting alone at the bar.

## THE GOOD KILL

“What the fuck is that bitch doing back here, Black?” Savage demanded. “Miggy just called saying she’s asking for you.”

Blackman was staring hard at the same woman. Something about her didn’t seem right to him. “Fuck if I know, Mr. Savage,” Blackman said. “But I’m about to find out.”

“Damn right you are. That bitch sure as hell better not be fucking up our New Orleans shit.”

As Blackman was leaving the office, Savage said, “And straighten that tie, mother fucker. How many times I gotta tell you, you representin’ me and my organization. You don’t go anywhere unless your shit is tight.”

Blackman yanked at this tie in a halfhearted effort to straighten it as he walked out the door opposite the one he had entered. He followed the hallway around the side of the club until he reached the door that opened into the main room next to the bar. As he opened it, the music blasted at him in its full rhythmic fury. Even though it was still early afternoon and there was only a spattering of customers in the club, he gave each of them a quick, habitual onceover to make sure none had a reputation he had to worry about. Satisfied, he nodded to the one-way mirror in the back knowing Savage was watching him, and then walked toward the familiar-looking woman waiting for him at the bar.

As Blackman walked up behind the woman, he made eye contact with her in the mirror that lined the length of the wall behind the bar and she turned on her barstool to face him. Even from the video feed in his office he could tell, as much as she looked like Ruby, something about her just wasn’t right. For one thing, he had never seen Ruby wearing a business suit. One of the club’s top earners, Ruby, like the flesh professional that she was, was always dressed in the most provocative of clothes. As much as he thought this woman was Ruby from a distance, when the woman turned in the stool to face him, his doubts were confirmed. Where Ruby’s eyes were big, alluring, and of a brown so dark they were almost black, this woman’s eyes, while also big and alluring, were of a sparkling emerald green. But every other characteristic of the woman was exactly like Ruby’s. The same thick, loosely curled afro – though Ruby usually wore hers unrestrained and wild, not pulled back into a restrictive ponytail like this woman was wearing hers. The same creamy, honey-colored skin. The same shapely figure. And even the same mole – Ruby had insisted it be referred to as a beauty mark – just above the left corner of the full lips. While anyone else would have mistaken her for Ruby, Blackman knew for certain this young woman definitely wasn’t she. Which must mean, Blackman concluded, that she was the twin sister he had always heard about.

“I’m the security manager,” Blackman said loudly in an effort to speak over the music. “I was told you were looking for me.”

Ruby’s sister held out her hand and leaned into Blackman. “Hello, Officer Blackman,” she said with a coolness that was hard not to notice even through the pounding music. “I’m sorry to bother you...”

Blackman took hold of the hand and shook it, noticing that the woman's fingernails were conservatively maintained, not the inch-long dagger-like fakes that Ruby wore. "You can drop the officer," Blackman said. "I'm no longer with the force. What can I do for you?"

The woman smiled. It was a polite but inquisitive smile, seemingly with an ulterior motive hiding behind it. "I look familiar to you, don't I, Mr. Blackman?"

Blackman looked her over then nodded toward the naked dancers on the stage. "Not sure. Your clothes are covering the things that I tend to remember most in a woman around here. Perhaps if you took them off for me and did some dance moves, it might jog my memory."

The woman's smile hardened after the comment. "My name is Toni Steele," she said, maintaining a calm demeanor. "You might remember my mother. Rashawna Steele?"

"Rashawna Steele," Blackman said slowly. "Now there's a name from the past. You mean the old whore who used to work the Lexington Hills neighborhood, right?"

Her mother being called a whore was nothing new to Toni. However, this man referring to her as one in such a blunt, ugly manner hit her so hard she had to struggle to contain her anger. "Yeah, that's her. Lexington Hills was your old beat, wasn't it?"

Blackman grew impatient. "Okay, Ms. Steele, I don't have time for history lessons, so I'll ask you one final time. What is it exactly I can do for you?"

Toni took in a deep breath. "Okay, you're right. The reason I'm here is because I'm looking for my sister, Whitney. Whitney Steele. I was told she was a dancer here."

"Sorry. No dancers here named Whitney," Blackman said. He began to walk away.

Toni reached out and grabbed his arm. "Wait. Please," she pleaded.

Blackman turned back. He looked down at Toni's hand holding his arm. He then looked hard at her.

Toni pulled her hand back as if it had just been burned. "Her stage name was Ruby. Ruby Black," she said as she sat back in the stool and looked up at the large man looming over her, a man whose presence had been looming over her for as long as she could remember. Her pent-up anger at the man surfaced and steered her off point again. "By the way, don't people also call you Black?" she asked. "It's quite the coincidence my sister's stage name is the same as your nickname, don't you think?"

"People call me a lot of things, so what?"

Toni looked around the club. "Look, is there someplace a bit quieter where we can talk? My sister has been missing now for over two weeks. Perhaps you can tell me something about her time here that would help me find her. Maybe I can talk to some of the dancers?"

Blackman glanced back over his shoulder toward the mirror in Savage's office. "You say her name is Ruby Black, huh?"

"Yes, her stage name anyway."

## THE GOOD KILL

“Wait here. I’ll be right back.” Blackman called out to the bartender. “Hey, Miggy, set her up with another one of whatever it is she’s drinking.” He walked toward the back of the club and exited through the door at the end of the bar.

The bartender set another club soda on the rocks with a squeeze of lime in front of Toni. She took a long drink from it, hoping to relieve the dryness in her throat. After draining the glass, she swirled the ice around inside of it, wishing now it had been mixed with something a bit stronger than lime to help sooth her nerves. This was her first time in a strip club and she hated everything about it. The music was unbearably loud, misogynistic, and violent. The lustful look in each man’s eye was primeval and disgusting. The naked women writhing up on the stage made her heart ache and her stomach nauseous. The fact that her sister’s life had been reduced to the point where she had to get up on that stage naked to try to support herself was too much for Toni to bear. How did their lives diverge so drastically? She gave thanks to Jesus that He never allowed her life to get sucked down that sewer hole into such a hateful and cruel world as did her sister and so many other of the West Baltimore girls she grew up with. She would rather die than have to support herself by selling her body, she thought, a thought she regretted as soon as she had it, for she knew that but for the grace of God she could have just as easily ended up dancing naked on the stage like her sister; or even worse, selling her body for drugs like her mother. Instead, she found herself to be blessed enough to be a freshman at Georgetown University with hopes of one day becoming a lawyer.

Toni was so deep into her thoughts that she jumped a little in her chair when Blackman tapped her on the shoulder. He nodded and told her to follow him. She took one last sip from her club soda, grabbed her purse, and followed Blackman across the club. As they weaved their way through the tables, the customers broke their fixed, eager eyes from the naked women on the stage to look her over as she passed. Several of them made lewd requests from her.

On the other side of the club, they came to a small room with a leather-padded door. Blackman held it open for Toni. When the door closed behind them, the music from the oversized speakers in the main room was silenced and was now being piped in at a more moderate volume. Toni looked around the dimly lit room and saw that it was lined with four single-seated booths on either side of it. In the far-right corner in the back, a youthful-looking dancer, flat-chested and wearing pigtails, grinded her ample backside into the lap of a man leaning back into the booth, his arms stretched across the top of it. He wore a stylish fedora pulled down low across his brow and a wet, lustful grin stretched wide across his face. His attention was focused solely on the swaying movements of the naked dancer between his legs.

Blackman continued walking to the back of the room to another padded door. He took out a ring full of keys from his pants pocket and flipped through them until he found the one he was looking for. He unlocked the door and held it open. When he saw

that Toni was still standing in the front of the lounge watching the performance, he said, "You want to watch the show or do you want to find out about your sister?"

Toni, embarrassed by her actions, collected herself and hurried toward Blackman who, with a nod of his head, indicated that Toni should continue on through.

But Toni hesitated at the door, trying to see what was beyond it. All she could make out was a hallway, narrow and dark.

"And, what's back there?" she asked, unable to mask the concern in her voice.

"Answers. Come on, let's go," Blackman said impatiently.

The lawyer-to-be side of Toni's brain worked hard to analyze the situation. Something didn't feel quite right. "Can't we just talk here? All you have to do is tell me what you know about my sister and then I'll leave."

"Look, Ms. Steele. I, personally, don't know anything about what happened to your sister, but I talked to my boss about it and he says he might have some information that could help you. He didn't tell me what it was so, if you want to find out what this information is, you'll have to speak to him about it yourself." He pointed down the hall. "He's down there waiting for you. The last room on the left." He pushed Toni into the hallway. When the door closed behind him, there was complete silence.

*The last room on the left*, Toni thought to herself. It sounded to her like the title of a low-budget horror movie. And here she was starring in it, doing exactly what every stupid actor in those movies always does. Instead of running as far away from the room as possible, she found herself walking down the dark, narrow hall toward it, knowing all along that inside the room was where the monster lay in wait.

Blackman stopped at the room's door, knocked once and, without waiting for a response, opened the door inwardly. He stepped inside the room and once again held the door open for Toni. This time she didn't hesitate. She walked past him and entered the room.

The monster was in there all right, right in front of her, leaning against the wall next to the twin-size bed, his legs crossed at the ankles. Even though she had never met the Hollywood Thug Killa personally, she recognized his handsome face instantly from all the times his mugshot appeared in the news while she was growing up. She hadn't heard anything about him for years. Why wasn't he in jail, locked away for good, she wondered.

The sound of the door closing behind her made her jump and instinctively turn and try to rush out of the room. She ran directly into Blackman's thick chest. It was then that she saw the other man in the room. This man was standing in the corner by the end of the bed. He was even larger and more intimidating than Blackman, looking like a super-sized version of the Hollywood Thug Killa. Did she know him? She didn't have time to ponder the question. Blackman grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her back around to face Savage.

## THE GOOD KILL

“Holy shit, Black,” Savage said as he walked toward Toni, “you were right.” He leaned his face close to hers and looked deep into her eyes. “It is the eyes.” He stepped back away only a short distance. “I didn’t think any bitch could be more beautiful than Ruby, but with those green eyes... Shit, this bitch here—”

“Mr. Blackman said you had some information that could help me find my sister,” Toni blurted out in a shaky voice.

Savage ignored the interruption and continued with his thought. “I never believed your bullshit before, Black, but, as much as I hate to admit it, with those green eyes, this bitch here just might be yours.”

Blackman grunted in response.

“Mr. Savage, could you just please tell me what you know about my sister?”

Savage laughed. “How ‘bout that. She knows who I am.” He bowed slightly. “I’m flattered.” But instead of answering Toni’s question, he spoke to T-Rex. “Terrence, you what, twenty-four, twenty-five?” He looked at Toni and winked as he gently rubbed her arm, “You about the same age as this fine-looking thang here, I bet.”

Toni pulled her arm away from Savage’s hand and struggled unsuccessfully to free her shoulders from Blackman’s grip.

“We went to school together,” T-Rex said, in response to his uncle’s question.

“How about that,” Savage said to Toni. “Up in here reuniting with your old classmate.” He turned back to his nephew. “This is all before your time, T, but back in the day when Blackman here was still a cop and I was still running Lexington Hills, he used to keep the streets clear for me so I could sling my shit and run my hos. In addition to keeping this mother fucker very well paid, I’d let him have his choice of any of my bitches. And wouldn’t you know, he’d choose the same nasty ho every time.” Savage began stroking Toni’s arm again. “The mother of this lovely thing right here.”

T-Rex looked at Toni and then at Blackman. “Are you telling me that Blackman is her father?”

“And Ruby’s, too. Don’t forget her,” added Savage.

T-Rex looked offended. “How come you never told me that before, Hollywood?”

Savage grinned. “Because I never believed it. Besides, who gives a fuck who a whore’s baby daddy is?”

“Are we gonna do this or what?” Blackman said.

“What? Do what?” Toni asked, looking around in a panic. “Look, let’s forget about everything. I just want to go.” She looked back over her shoulder at Blackman. “Will you please let go of my shoulders so I can leave?”

Blackman tightened his grip in response.

“I don’t see it,” T-Rex said, leaning forward to get a better look at Toni. “Maybe a little in the eyes like you said, but I don’t see that big ugly mother fucker as the father of something so fine as this bitch.”

“Fuck you, T-Rex,” Blackman said.

Savage laughed. "Sorry, Black. I gotta agree with T. You're one big ugly white boy."

Blackman, instead of responding to his boss, squeezed his fingers even harder into Toni's shoulders.

Toni cried out from the pain and once again tried to free herself from her father's grip. Once again, she failed. Even though she tried hard not to, she began to cry.

"Okay, okay, let's do it," Savage said.

On his boss's order, Blackman threw Toni down onto the bed. "Come over here and hold her down, T-Rex."

The large man lumbered over from the corner and sat down on the edge of the bed. He leaned across Toni, pinning her down. Toni screamed and began uselessly trying to free herself from beneath the weight of her former high school classmate.

Blackman smacked her across the face. "You scream again and you'll experience pain like never before."

Toni, her large emerald green eyes wider than they've ever been, began to choke on her sobs.

Blackman turned to the small dresser next to the bed. He took out four pairs of handcuffs from the top drawer. He shackled his daughter's arms to the bed's top metal posts and her legs to the posts at the end of the bed. T-Rex returned to his position in the corner of the small room.

Blackman then pulled out a ball gag from the drawer. When Toni saw it, she started screaming again and writhing frantically on the bed as she struggled against the restraints. Blackman sat down next to her. He forced the ball into her mouth and then strapped it tight around the back of her head. When he finished, he looked up at his boss.

Savage took a leather pouch from the inside pocket of his suit jacket and handed it to Blackman. "Everything's ready."

Blackman unzipped the pouch and laid it open on the bed next to Toni. "Stop squirming around goddammit," he said. He took a small leather strap from the pouch and tightened it around the middle of Toni's right bicep. He poked around her arm until he found the vein he was looking for. He kept a finger on it while he grabbed a small packet from the pouch and ripped it open with his teeth. He then removed the finger and cleaned the vein with the alcohol swab. "Okay, T-Rex. Come grab her arm," he said.

He dropped to the floor on one knee as T-Rex once again lay across Toni and took firm hold of her right arm at the wrist and bicep.

"Hold her steady now," Blackman said as he eyed the syringe and needle and then lined it up to the vein. He looked up at Savage.

"Go ahead on, mother fucker," Savage said with a ruthless smile. "Turn that bitch into a moneymaking fiend."

Blackman nodded in compliance and inserted the needle skillfully into Toni's arm. When he pulled on the plunger, a little puff of blood swirled into the syringe. Satisfied

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that he was in the vein, he loosened the leather strap, and injected the heroin. Within minutes of the narcotic hitting the blood stream, Toni became calm, sedated.

“Just think, Ms. Steele,” Savage said as Blackman returned the paraphernalia to its case, “after we do this to you a few more times, instead of fighting us, you’ll be begging us for this shit.”

Toni didn’t respond. She just lay cuffed and spread-eagle on the bed lost to the drug, a spot of blood oozing from the needle mark ran slowly down her arm.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### BEFORE

A patch in the dusty street swells like a boil, the pressure from below uncontainable, volcanic. Cracks in the blanched asphalt form slowly at first, but then, just before the eruption, the playback speed switches to fast-forward and the deadly payload releases upward and outward so fast that everything happening around it seems to stand still. The armored vehicle patrolling the street passes slowly over the IED's kill zone, leaving the two soldiers trailing on foot in the vehicle's lumbering wake centered directly over the burgeoning discharge. He watches frozen, unable to move, unable to look away as the force of the blast flips the rear end of the armored vehicle up and over while simultaneously disintegrating the soldiers, turning them into instant gory plumes, plumes that rise to the sky, turning it from a blinding white to a hellish red, and then falls down upon him like a red pulpy rain. When the carnage of rain stops falling, he is in a bombed-out house. Screams are heard coming from the back of it. He walks cautiously toward them, trying to understand what's being said, but their meaning eludes him. It's dark. He flips down his night vision goggles, and with them, he can now see the screams coming at him like sonic waves. He calls out for backup over his bone phone, but he can't speak. He hollers into the transmitter. No sounds emit from his mouth. His steps are heavy, burdensome. The screams grow louder. He crouches low and draws his weapon to the ready; however, instead of drawing up his HK MP7 submachine gun, he's holding a young girl in his arms. She is moaning from pain but completely limp. Explosions go off outside the house. He takes off his vest lined with ballistic plates and wraps it around the girl. He then takes off his helmet and places it over her face. He turns to exit, to save her, but the screams grow louder. They hold him, paralyze him. The louder they get, the closer he thinks he is getting to understanding their meaning; yet the meaning continues to escape him. The floor begins to sway up and down. The walls begin to pulse in and out. Each time he follows the hallway around a corner, he's back to where he began. Everything is the same except the screams. They grow louder and louder, red blasts of waves that push back against

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him and the girl until he can no longer make any movement forward. His legs are like pilings driven firmly into the floor as wave after screaming wave crashes violently over him and the girl. Between the swells he sees an open door at the end of the hall. It is from there where the screams are coming, waves so large and so loud now the force from them rips the girl from his arms and washes her away. Without her he is unable to resist the pressure any longer. His legs tear from the floor and the screaming waves flush him tumbling and turning out of the undulating house into a bloody sea of red oblivion.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The killing wasn't new. What was new was the extrajudicial nature of it. Military combat, apart from the chaos and madness inherent in any battle, comes constrained within the regulating bounds of uniformed codes and practiced good order and discipline as tempered by the history of warfare and the refining evolution of ethics, law, and tradition. Tonight's kill, however, would have no such constraints, save that of the killer's ability and imagination.

He had thought about these things, but he wasn't thinking about them now. Now he was on task, and such unnecessary thoughts were a dangerous distraction. As it had in combat from years of training and repetition, his mind went instinctively to a place where the past, the future, and any irrelevant thoughts were displaced by the demands of the present, the immediacy of the now.

Devoid of thought but full of purpose, the killer drove his gunmetal gray 1973 Plymouth Barracuda convertible slowly, but not too slowly, through the dark and shadowed suburban New Jersey neighborhood, the light of the waxing crescent moon just off the Eastern horizon proving feeble and insignificant. He didn't stop at the house where his mark resided, nor did he even glance at it – he knew his mark was in there – he just cruised on past it until he reached the cul-de-sac where he looped slowly around and headed back up the street, stopping several hundred feet before the house where it could best be observed prior to go time with minimal risk of him being noticed.

After pulling over to the curb and killing the engine, the killer reached around to the backseat and rifled through his backpack, pulling from it a large Honeycrisp apple. He bit partially into it and held it between his teeth as he grabbed his laptop from the passenger's seat and powered it on. As the computer booted up, he began eating the apple, chewing each bite slowly and thoughtfully. By the time he had launched the necessary programs and had run a series of illicit, proprietary executables that enabled him to hack into the mark's network and take over his computer, all which he had first managed to do weeks ago shortly after the operation had begun, the killer had finished the apple and had begun working on another.

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Now that he was mirroring the mark's computer, a computer the mark used to manage his home security network, the killer could now monitor the activities within and without the house through each of its nine security cameras, of which included a camera in the master bedroom, a camera the mark used less for security purposes and more to record his sexual exploits with his unsuspecting victims. As of now, however, the camera's primary use was for the killer to monitor his mark as he lay in his bed binge-watching Netflix videos. Of the other eight security cameras, one monitored the foyer, one monitored the garage, one was positioned over the front door and monitored all incoming and outgoing traffic as well as the front yard, the driveway, a portion of the sidewalk, and a sliver of the street, one was positioned over the outside of the walk-out basement door, monitoring all who entered and exited there as well as a significant portion of the backyard, and one was mounted on each of the outside corners of the house, providing the mark a complete, 360-degree visual coverage of the outside of the entire half-acre property.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, the mark was bound to a chair and speaking slowly into his phone's camera. His large ears were a flaming red. An oily sheen of sweat glared off his round, expansive face. A black gag ball hung lifeless from his fleshy neck. His voice, with a slight Slavic accent, shook from fear. Not much of reader, he stumbled awkwardly over the words typed on the sheet of paper that hung before him.

*My name is Zikmund Blazek. I was born on May 13, 1980, in Czechoslovakia in a small village in what is now part of the Czech Republic to a Czech father and an American mother. After my parents divorced in 1993, my mother and I moved to Palm Bay, Florida. I now live at 413 Sampson Street in East Newark, New Jersey. I've worked under the aliases of Tony Smith, Robbie Larson, and Pavlov Bobek. My nicknames are Big Zik, Z Blaze, and Knuckles. Knuckles, because I always carry brass knuckles with me and I look for reasons to use them often.*

Blazek paused to clear his throat. As his nickname Big Zik implied, he was a large, heavysset man. His tight crewcut made way for his prominent ears to stand out even more prominently. His close, droopy eyes gave him the look of a sleepy, hound dog. When he spoke, his jowls shook in time with the shaking of his voice. He looked briefly off camera to his right before continuing speaking.

*Since moving to the States, I have been in and out of juvenile detention and prison for crimes such as larceny, grand theft auto, possession, assault, and manslaughter.*

*But I have never been incarcerated for the crimes for which I shall now confess and be punished.*

He again looked off camera. This time he spoke to the killer. “What the fuck is this bullshit? I ain’t reading no—”

A blur flashed in front of Blazek and a resounding whack was heard, followed by the thumping to the floor of Blazek’s right hand. Blood squirted on the camera lens. The killer walked quickly to the phone and paused the recording as his prisoner thrashed against his bonds and screamed in agony.

When the recording began again, the blood on the lens had been cleaned. Blazek’s face was covered in sweat, tears, and snot. After several unsuccessful attempts, he continued reading again from the blood-spattered sheet of paper taped to the camera stand under the phone.

*Three years ago I began working as a broker for overseas criminal organizations looking to traffic young women and girls on the East Coast. Mostly I worked with gangs from Russia and the Baltic States, but recently I’ve also been doing some work with the Mexicans, Chinese, and Japanese. For a commission, I help these overseas groups move their women and girls into the States by obtaining for them fake passports, drivers licenses, and other immigration documents. I also will connect them with gangs and other criminal elements in the States who they then sell the women and girls to, or use them to barter for other goods, such as drugs and weapons.*

*You will find the contact information of many of the buyers and sellers on my phone. However, I’ve written down a more complete list of names and my means of communicating with them on a sheet of paper. You will find this list on the desk next to me. Finally, I know that the life that I’ve chosen to live has hurt and destroyed the lives of so many others. I am an evil man completely deserving of...*

He looked at the killer. Fresh tears began running down his face. He took in a deep breath and then let it out. He tried again.

*I am an evil man completely deserving of the punishment I am about to receive. I only ask that God have...*

He stopped reading once again. His eyes narrowed, and a look of defiance overcame him. He gave the killer a brief, venomous look, and then began screaming fiercely into the camera. “I don’t know who this asshole is or why he is doing this to me, but this big crazy mother fucker is around six feet five and looks like he weighs about two-hundred-and-thirty—”

## THE GOOD KILL

*Astaghfirullah!* With one swing of the machete, Blazek was decapitated. The force of the swing caused the severed head to fly back behind the body, spinning face forward as it did. It sounded like a watermelon breaking open when it hit the floor.

The killer turned off the camera and removed the phone from the tripod. He returned the tripod, the duct tape, and his knives to the backpack. Not minding the blood pooled large on the floor, he walked through it as he took Blazek's phone to the table next to the headless body. He leaned against the table casually as he launched the phone's browser and navigated it to 4chan.org where, from its homepage, he tapped a menu link that took him to the /b/ - random message board. There, he uploaded Blazek's confessional video. He then copied the link to the video and pasted it into an email that he sent to the crime reporter for the Newark Daily Gazette. He left the phone on top of the sheet of paper with the list of names and their contact information that Blazek had written earlier at the prodding of the killer's machete.

\* \* \*

Disallowing any unnecessary thinking – he was hours away from that luxury – the killer opened the trunk of his car, now parked at the end of a litter-strewn, dead-end street under a gnarly old oak tree and its canopy of dead leaves, hiding the Cuda from the thin light of the sliver moon now on its descent toward the Western horizon. He took out a black plastic lawn bag and shook it open. He took off his backpack and placed it inside the bag. He then set the plastic bag on the ground next to him and began to quickly undress. He removed his black leather gloves, black knitted balaclava, black long-sleeve shirt, black leather boots, black pants, and gray boxer shorts and stuffed them all inside the bag. Standing naked, he began to dress himself with the change of clothes that were folded neatly inside a gym bag setting next to the spare tire. Once dressed, he donned a blue ball cap and flipped up the hood of his black sweatshirt. Finally, he tied the top of the plastic bag into a knot and set it in the trunk next to the gym bag.

Three-and-a-half hours later the killer parked the Cuda under the nine-foot cantilevered forebay of a late eighteenth-century Pennsylvania Sweitzer barn that was banked stoically into the side of a rolling hill. He left the car running as he got out and slid open the set of large barn doors. After pulling the car inside the barn, he remained behind the wheel for a moment while he took in a deep breath and rubbed his eyes aggressively. He was exhausted, but he couldn't allow that to distract him from his focus. There was much work yet to be done.

He took the plastic bag from the trunk and walked to the east end of the barn, past a tarpaulin-covered car, past the vehicle inspection pit, and grabbed a five-gallon gas tank as he exited through a side door. Outside, he walked over to a 55-gallon burn barrel that stood near a woodshed with the same gray, weather-beaten look to it as the barn.

Beyond the woodshed, dark snow clouds set heavily upon a bleak, wind-swept field. Row after row of sheared cornstalks stood like bleak markers in a frozen graveyard that sloped gradually downwards for many acres before running upwards again toward a low, distant hilltop where a forest of barren trees stood shadowed and silent.

After setting the plastic bag and gas tank down next to the barrel, the killer grabbed a box of matches off a windowsill inside the woodshed and an armful of kindling wood from a pile stacked neatly under the eave outside it. He set the kindling up inside the barrel and doused it with gasoline. The strong fumes made him lightheaded, reminding him of his empty stomach. He struck a match and tossed it into the barrel. An orange, snapping flame whooshed upward, invigorating him as it chased away the morning chill. When the kindling was burning strong, he fed two small, seasoned logs into the flame. After the logs had caught fire, he laid a third, larger log across them. He warmed his hands over the barrel as he stared down into the blaze.

When the fire had matured, he placed the plastic bag into the barrel. The plastic melted fast and the bag's contents spilled out, threatening to extinguish the flame. He grabbed a long, thick stick that leaned against the shed and poked the blackened end of it into the barrel, moving the contents around until the fire could breathe and prosper again. Once the backpack and clothes had caught, he added some more kindling and then returned to the barn.

Inside, he lit a coal fire in the hearth of the small forge that was set up in the first of the four stalls in the back of the east corner of the barn. He took down a pair of twelve-inch tongs that hung on the wall at the side of the stall and stuck them in his back pants pocket. As he walked back out to the burn barrel, he picked up a rusted metal bucket along the way.

Fire and burning ash rose to greet him as he poked around in the barrel with the stick. The boots still had some burning to do, as did the leather scabbard, most of the tripod legs, and the thick roll of duct tape. But the clothes, the blue folder filled with his mission notes, and the backpack had all turned to ash. He opened the cleanout door at the bottom of the barrel and tamped out with his foot the several small coals that spilled out with the ash. He rummaged inside the bottom of the barrel with the tongs and, one at a time, pulled out four heated, ash-dusted knives and one large machete. He set them carefully, reverently almost, into the metal bucket.

Back at the forge, the coal fire in the hearth was burning nicely on its own. Its blue glow casting warm, stretching shadows out from the stall and into the center of the barn. He flipped a switch mounted on a post next to the hearth and a blower kicked on that fed the fire from below. The flame grew, and a strong yellow-white glow emitted from its center. He placed more coal around the burning mound and then set the end of the twenty-four-inch machete into the heart of the flame. When the metal was glowing red, he pulled it out with the tongs and began working it with a three-and-a-quarter-pound, cross peen hammer on the face of the 248-pound, 1902 Hay Budden forged anvil

## THE GOOD KILL

that was located prominently in the center of the stall. Sparks shot out from each blow as he slowly shaped the blade into its new form.

His Veterans Affairs therapist had recommended to him on more than one occasion that he should find himself a hobby, one that he could engage himself in whenever he felt his moods were growing too dark. He ignored the advice for many months after his discharge from the hospital, unable to find the adequate motivation. However, once he had found the motivation, he also found blacksmithing, a relaxing yet physically demanding hobby that aligned neatly with the direction his newfound motivation was leading him.

Since blacksmithing was new to the killer, he would often have to refer to an old, weathered book called *The Ancient Art of Blacksmithing*, a book that his father had stumbled upon many years ago in a used bookstore when the killer was just a child. Intrigued by the possibilities, his father purchased the book with a new desire to learn the craft and employ it as a weekend hobby for himself. He even went so far as to build and equip the forge exactly to the specifications laid out within its pages. However, the father had to abandon his newly found passion after his nascent consulting firm specializing in the nascent field of computer security began to prosper, turning his free time on the weekends into a scarce commodity.

The killer now kept the book on hand to help him master the various techniques of the trade, such as when to apply the borax when forge welding his knives together after the kill, knives he had originally forged separately for the kill; or how, after the kill, to hot cut a section away from one of the knives so the cutaway piece could be forged into a square nail. As a novice, his quality of work was far from superior; however, he was a fast learner and he found peace in the hard work it took to smith. There was a meditative aspect to it in the pounding and shaping of the metal and in the patience and focus it took to complete even the simplest of tasks.

Just three short days ago the killer had slipped out of the barn on an ATV with several white, two-gallon buckets stacked together and strapped within the cargo carrier in the back, along with a pick and shovel. He drove the ATV down the hill behind the barn, across the field, and into the eastern side of the forest. He followed the dirt path, hardened by decades of feet, hooves, and tires, until it led him to the rusty-colored creek. When he returned to the farm nearly an hour later, the buckets were now set side-by-side within the carrier and filled to their brims with iron-laden river rock. He unloaded the buckets near the burn barrel by the woodshed and, after returning the ATV to the barn, he got into his pickup and left the farm.

When he returned two hours later, he drove the pickup to the back of the barn and parked the truck near the buckets. From the back of the truck he unloaded a dozen cinder blocks and then used them to build a rudimentary furnace. He then spent the rest of the day smelting the ore from the river rock, firing away all the unnecessary gases and slag

from it and leaving only the iron, of which, when he had finally smelted enough, he then forged into his weapons of death and retribution.

After four hours of straight, meditative but exhaustive labor, the killer took from the coals for the last time what were once those five separate weapons of death and retribution, and what were now one singular symbol of eternal life and forgiveness. The large, coal-fired cross cast a red glow upon him as he held it up and studied his work. He wasn't a believer, he had removed that burden from his life long ago when still a child, not long after his mother's senseless death, but he always appreciated the simple message and Zen-like qualities of the cross and, for a moment, felt a resurgence of energy from the one he had just created. He clamped the iron cross down over the anvil's pritchel hole and punched out a small square through its red-hot center, a square fitted precisely for the nail he had forged earlier from a chunk of one of the knives.

When he placed the cross in the quench tank, the water hissed and steamed from the heat. He left it there to cool as he fetched a ladder and placed it under the thick summer beam that ran the length of the barn, giving support to most of the loft. The cross was still hot when he removed it from the tank, but the heat wasn't strong enough to penetrate his thick, flame resistant gloves. He climbed the ladder and carefully nailed the black metal cross onto the wooden beam, hanging it next to the similar cross he had forged after his first kill.

After climbing down from the ladder, he had found his legs had grown weak. His body, seeming to have sensed the completion of the task, switched off its rote, kinetic memory mode that had enabled it to function so efficiently in a focused state free from physical needs and mental distractions. No longer on task, all those pent-up needs and distractions released and washed over him in relentless, pounding waves of hunger, exhaustion, and remorse. His body tired and aching, he dropped to the cold dirt floor and prostrated himself before the crosses.

*Astaghfirullah!*

Vivid, bloody images from the recently completed mission flashed through his mind and reminded him of the initial horrors that had driven him to seek out such vengeance and to kill so mercilessly in the first place.

*Astaghfirullah!*

Sobs of sorrow and helplessness wracked his body. Hot tears cut tracks through his dirty cheeks and dripped to the floor as he moaned and prayed out loud for each one of the thirteen souls that had been haunting him ever since his final, failed operation in Mosul.

*Astaghfirullah! Astaghfirullah! Astaghfirullah...*

## CHAPTER NINE

Toni didn't know where she was, nor did she care. Had she cared, she could have simply looked out the window at the litter-strewn street lined with boarded up and dilapidated row houses to know that she was in a bad place. The gritty room itself, with its large, busted out hole through the drywall next to the bathroom door, a bare bulb overhead casting a weak yellow glow on the thick layer of rat droppings within the hole, would have been enough of a clue to warn her of the bad place she was in if she had cared enough to notice. But she didn't care about where she was or the danger that she might be in. The only thing she cared about was when her next high would be.

Had she cared for more than just her next high, she would have realized that she was lying on a rickety bed without sheets or blankets, its stained mattress sagging like a swayback horse, while wearing the same clothes she had been wearing so many days ago when she went to Fantasy Plus in search of her sister. She would have also realized, had she cared, that she had not showered nor brushed her teeth since that same day. Her gnawing stomach, burning and soured from a lack of food didn't matter; nor did the pain and discomfort of her cramped and constipated bowels. Not once did she think about the fact that she was absent from her studies at Georgetown; nor, since first entering the strip club so many days ago, did she even think about her missing sister.

All she thought about, all she cared for, yearned for, painfully ached for was her next high, so all she did was lie unmoving on the sagging mattress and watch with unblinking eyes the tarnished brass knob on the bedroom door. She watched the knob, not knowing or caring if she had been doing so for five minutes or five days, waiting for it to turn and for the door to open and for the person bringing her next high to walk into the room. If someone who did not know Toni was trapped within a heroin nightmare had happened upon the room and had seen her lying there on the bed like she was, this person may have assumed that she was in a vegetative state, or perhaps even dead, the way some people die with their blank eyes remaining open. And when the knob finally began to turn, this person would be very surprised, frightened even, to see Toni coming to life and springing from the bed and leaping for the door beastlike, ravenous and desperate.

When Savage opened the door, Toni was on him even before he could fully enter the room, her hands rubbing all over his chest, his back, his back pants pockets, his front pants pockets, his crotch, trying to discover where on his person he was holding her next high.

“Where is it? You got what I need, right?” Toni asked in a raspy, wavering voice.

Savage pushed her away from him and laughed. “Damn, girl. You smell like shit.”

Toni regained her balanced and was back on him again like a magnet to steel. “Come on, Mr. Savage. Don’t do me like that. You know I’m hurting bad.” Her hands continued their desperate search upon his body.

Savage found a spot on the edge of the mattress that wasn’t too badly stained and sat down. He crossed his legs and looked Toni over with a knowing smile as she stood before him, hugging herself, shifting from foot to foot as if she had to pee. After he lit up a Newport, he patted on the bed for her to sit down next to him. He blew out a thick plume of smoke and said, “You know, we need to talk about this habit of yours and how much it’s costing me. H don’t come cheap, baby.”

Toni’s eyes, their pupils mere pinpoints within the faded green of the irises, went wide from fear. “What? What do you mean? I don’t give a fuck how it—”

She stopped speaking as a moment of clarity struck her. Tears welled in the corner of her eyes. “Look at me,” she said, holding up her arms in indication of her sad appearance. “Why are you doing this to me?” She looked around the room as if seeing it for the first time and then began to sob. “I’m supposed to be studying to become a lawyer...”

Savage turned toward her. His handsome, chiseled features softened into a compassionate look of fatherly concern. “Hey, you’re no prisoner here, baby. You came to me for help, remember? And that’s what I’m up in here trying to do. Help you find your sister.”

Toni looked up from her hands. Her eyes bloodshot. Her face wet from tears. Her supple honey-brown skin now taut and dry and drained of color. “You know where my sister is?” she asked.

Savage dropped his cigarette to the warped, wooden floor and stamped it out. He put his arm around Toni’s shoulders. “Not yet. But we’re getting close.” He then put a finger under her chin and gently raised her face up so she could look him in the eyes. “But if I’m right and it’s the people I think it is who have her, then you gotta know that they are some evil mother fuckers.”

“If you know who has my sister, you got to tell me and let me go so I can get her. Please, Mr. Savage.”

Savage sniffed. His features changed from the compassionate father figure back to the cold-hearted pimp that he was. “Listen to this light-skinned bitch telling me, the Hollywood Thug Killa, the mother fuckin’ beast that owns these mother fuckin’ streets,

that I gots to do this and I gots to do that. How the fuck you think you gonna be able to get your sister all by yourself, Little Miss Lawyer Girl?"

"I-I won't get her by myself. I'll tell the police. Th-they'll help me. Look, Mr. Savage," she said as she held out her bare arms full of needle marks. "I won't say anything to anyone about any of this. I swear to God."

"The police?" Savage rose from the bed, his face twisted from anger. He looked down on her and said, "Shit, for a tight-ass college girl who's supposed to be so fucking smart, you're acting like a dumbass bitch saying stupid shit like that."

Toni was confused. "What do you mean it's stupid? If someone has kidnapped my sister, what do you expect me to do besides go to the police for help?"

"Damn, girl. I can't believe you a Sandtown ho talking about going snitchin' to the Five-O, especially since you first came to *me* for help."

Toni rose from the bed and pushed Savage hard in the chest with two hands. "Look at me," she screamed. "How is turning me into a fucking heroin addict going to help me find my sister?" Her resolved faded immediately and she collapsed back down on the bed and choked out hard sobs.

Like a chameleon, the anger in Savage's eyes disappeared and his seductive smile returned. He sat back down next to Toni and once again put his arm around her. He spoke softly. "I know everything seems fucked up right now, but you gotta trust ol' Hollywood, baby. You'll understand everything soon enough, but for now all you gotta know is that all this shit you're going through now ain't nothing but..." He paused to find the word he was looking for. "...preparation. We're preparing you, baby. That's all we're doing. And that's all you needs to know."

Toni's head was spinning and her cravings for the heroin were gnawing at her. Exhausted, she said, "Preparation? Preparation for what?"

"Shit, girl. What the fuck we just been talking about. To save Ruby. Here you go, look at it this way..." He turned her toward him so she could see how earnest he was. "Let's just say that what we're doing here is helping you to get yourself into character."

Toni fell back onto the bed and closed her eyes. "Her name isn't Ruby, Mr. Savage. It's Whitney. Whitney Steele. And I have no idea... what the fuck it is you're trying to tell me."

"I know, I know. But listen, if anyone's going to be able to get close to the people who I believe are holding Ru— your sister, Whitney, it's going to be you. But you're not going to be able to do it looking and acting like a bitchy little law student, you feel me? You gotta toughen your ass up."

Toni laughed a slow, pathetic laugh. "You're trying to tell me that I have to go undercover as a junkie to rescue my sister?"

"No, not as a junkie, but as someone who understands the junkie's world." He pulled Toni up by the arm. "Listen to me, now. This is important."

Toni's head wobbled. After a moment, her eyes opened into heavy-lidded slits. "I'm listening," she said, her words slow and thick.

Savage continued. "Before your sister disappeared, she was working as a stripper and a prostitute at one of the clubs down at The Block."

Toni tried hard to focus. "But I heard she was dancing at your club, not downtown. That's why I went there in the first place."

"The point is," Savage said patiently, "if you want to get close to thugs, you gonna have to become a mother fuckin' thug yourself. And that's what I'm trying to help you do, girl, become a mother fucking thug."

Toni sighed hard and her head lolled back. "Can we please continue this talk after I get high? I'm really hurting now, Mr. Savage. I can't focus on what you're saying."

"Yeah, about that," Savage said, shaking his head with concern. "It brings us back to where we started. The cost it's taking me to help you prepare for all this shit, none of it comes cheap. Especially all the valuable time it's keeping me away from running my businesses."

Toni lay back down on the bed. Her sobs were slow and intermittent now.

"I'm happy to help you, Toni," Savage continued, "but I need to find some way to cover my expenses, that's all."

Toni's face was tear-streaked and swollen. "I got some money saved," she said. "If you promise me you'll help me get my sister back, I'll give you all I have."

Savage was pleased. "Okay, good. That's a start. Depending on how much you have, it might help cover some of the costs I've already invested in all this. But I'm thinking it may take some time for us to get you ready. We got to consider the long-term costs. Any idea how we can cover them?"

Toni could barely speak now. "What... How much... I don't know how else...to get more... money."

Savage sighed. "That's going to be a problem then."

"Please... Mr. Savage..."

"I have an idea," Savage said. He pulled Toni back up again by the arm.

Toni struggled to open her eyes. "What... is it?"

"You can work at my club, you know, doing some dancing. Help our customers have a good time while they're there. You can do that, right? For your sister?"

At first Savage thought that Toni hadn't heard him, that she had passed out. But then her eyes opened wide.

"You're telling me you want me to strip and whore for you?" Toni said, struggling to sit fully back up. "No fucking way, Mr. Savage."

Savage grabbed her hard by the shoulders and turned her to him. His eyes narrowed. His voice growled as he spoke through his teeth. "Bitch, if I wanted to, I could have been trickin' your ass out a week ago. I'm telling you, that if you want me to continue to help you find your sister, Ruby fucking Black, then this is the way we're going to do it. You're

## THE GOOD KILL

going to work my club, doing what I say needs to be done to earn the money that I say gots to be earned to cover my costs. If not, then you're out on your fucking ass, bitch. And I'll tell you what, Little Miss Lawyer Girl, if you even think about going to the po-po about any of this shit, then you and me have got a big mother fucking problem. You feeling me, right?"

Toni's head dropped to Savage's shoulder. "I can't, Mr. Savage. I just can't. I worked hard my whole life to not get trapped in all this kind of shit. To not go down the same path my mother and Whitney went down."

Savage stood up and walked to the door. "Well, if that's the case, then you're on your own, college girl." He turned the doorknob.

Toni sprung from the bed and ran over to him, grabbing him from behind by the shoulders. "Mr. Savage, please, don't go yet. You can't leave me like this. I need to get high. I hurt so bad."

Savage shrugged her hands off his shoulders. "Bitch, I already told you what you need to do." He reached down and pulled up his pant leg. Tucked inside his sock was a small heroin kit. He pulled it out and held it in front of Toni. "If you don't want to do that for me, then I'll be damned if I'm gonna keep spending my money on this shit to help you get what you want." He waved the kit in Toni's face and then started walking out the door.

Toni pulled him back into the room and slammed the door shut. She looked at Savage with frantic, desperate eyes and then hugged him as tight as she could. "Don't go. Please... I-I'll do whatever you want, Mr. Savage... Anything."

Savage pushed her away from him and walked over to the bed and sat back down. "Now you're finally talking some sense, girl." He set the kit on the bed next to him and zipped it open. He then leaned back on his elbows and smiled. "Now get your ass over here and show me exactly whatever it is you're willing to do for me so's I can go ahead and keep on doing all the shit I been doing for you."

Toni walked slowly over to Savage. She stopped before him, unable to go any farther. Her body started shaking before the sobs came.

"Go ahead on, bitch, and get to doing what you walked over here to do."

Crying, Toni knelt between Savage's outspread legs and, despite the tears running hot down her cheeks, and despite the vows she had made to herself so many years ago, she unzipped his pants with shaking hands and reluctantly got to doing to him what she had walked over to do.

\* \* \*

Savage stepped out of the room and locked the door behind him. As he walked down the dark, decrepit hallway of the battered row house, one of three he used throughout

Kurt Brindley

Eastern Baltimore to pimp his stable of whores, he smiled to himself as he calculated how much he expected her to soon be earning for him.

## CHAPTER TEN

### BEFORE

Everything is silent. Beyond silent. Even the subtle sound of the blood rushing in his ears and the heart beating in his chest are absent, their sounds being sucked out behind him into the void, the black, before they can disturb the atmosphere around him. But he knows the screams are still there. He can't hear them, but, like his silent heartbeat, he can feel them. Everything is black, almost purple, until he turns the corner when he can see light seeping from beneath the closed door at the end of the hallway. His feet are bare and his steps are silent on the cold tiled floor. He can feel the vibrations of the screams in the floor making their way through his feet, up his legs, and throughout his body. Waves of silent screams vibrate through him. He shakes without control. His steps become uncertain. The tile beneath his feet cracks. The hallway twists violently, throwing him against the wall. It continues to twist until the wall becomes the floor, then the ceiling. The door, his goal, remains unmoving even as the hallway twists. He can no longer walk upright so he begins to crawl. He crawls as fast as he can, for as the hallway twists, faster and faster with each turn, the door at the end of the hallway with the light seeping out from beneath it, gets farther away. No matter how fast he tries to crawl, the hallway twists faster, slamming him onto the walls, the ceiling, the floor repeatedly, tumbling him like a helpless rag within a clothes dryer, spinning and spinning until the hall becomes nothing but—

*Astaghfirullah!*

The perception of a threat slipped through the razor-wire-contained prison of his nightmare and woke Killian violently. His chest pounded from the fright, reminding him of the thin slice of shrapnel that had shot through his back and pierced its way through the dura matter, the intercostal veins and arteries, the lung tissue, and the left atrium's thin, fatty layer of the epicardium, until finally coming to a precarious rest within the myocardium, the middle and thickest layer of the heart wall. Each accelerated and pounding heartbeat brought with it an accelerated, deadly risk. The sheets, damp from the nightmare sweat, stuck to him, leaving him feeling as if he were being

prepared for the grave, mummified. He panicked and threw the death shroud off his body. Breathing hard, he stared at the ceiling wondering if the threat was real or just a further extension of the hellish, pounding dream from which he woke. If he woke.

A throat was cleared near the window. "Hello, Senior Chief Lebon."

Killian's head whipped toward the voice.

Navy Commander Darius Walker stood up from the recliner. He picked up his combination cover from the stand next to the chair and tucked it smartly under his left arm. His dark brown hair with its tight afro was close-cropped, neat, and tight. He was tall, built solid, and looked poster-ready in his service dress blue uniform.

Killian's first effort to sit up in bed out of respect for his commanding officer failed. The pain, too prolific to pinpoint its origin, held him down. His second effort got him up as far as to his right elbow. "The team? Is everyone okay?"

The commander looked back over his shoulder at the open door. He walked over to it and closed it before speaking. "Everyone's fine," he said. "Of course, they all miss the hell out of you and send their regards." The commander's smile faded. "How are you, Kill? They treating you right, shipmate?"

Killian brushed over the question. He was eager for news direct from the battlefield. "I'll live. What's going on with Kobani? The news reports say Raqqa's about to be liberated."

The commander stood a bit taller. His dark, square chin jutted out. "Indeed, it has. Those sick fuck ISIS bastards finally got their asses handed to them."

"What about the team? They back at Little Creek?"

"Not yet," the commander said, the pride in his voice remaining evident. "They're still in the fight. Shipped out from Kobani a couple weeks ago to..." He paused, as if struck by a thought. "Well, you know. They're still out there kicking some jihadi ass."

Killian struggled hard through the pain to sit all the way up. "Shipped out to where? Yemen, right? All the scuttlebutt about Niger back before I got my ass blown up was just bullshit, right?"

The commander dropped his eye contact with Killian and looked down to the floor.

"What the fuck, commander? Shipped to where?" It was hard to tell if the grimace Killian spoke through was from the pain or from his rising anger.

The commander looked back to Killian. "Look, Kill. I know it's fucked up, but I can't... I've already said too much. The review boards, they made their decision... They..." The commander frowned and looked down to the floor again.

Killian had never seen his commanding officer behave in such an indecisive way. He forced out a harsh laugh. "What the fuck are you talking about, sir?"

The commander sighed and looked Killian in the eye. "It's hard as hell for me to tell you this, Kill, but... you've been medically retired."

Killian started to speak but the words didn't come.

## THE GOOD KILL

The commander continued. “The evaluation boards, both medical and physical, have ruled that the shrapnel in your heart along with the shock to your brain from the blast have left you... well, unfit for duty.”

Killian looked down from the commander’s pained eyes to his Budweiser, the golden special warfare insignia of an eagle spreading its wings while holding onto an anchor, a trident, and a flintlock pistol that the elite few worthy and privileged enough to be called a Navy SEAL wore prominently and proudly over their medals. The twinge of pride he always felt when pinning his insignia on his uniform sliced through his chest like a knife. He lay slowly back into his pillow as the realization sunk in that, while he would always be a SEAL in his heart, he would never again be a SEAL where it mattered most – in combat fighting in defense of his country. His eyes found their stare spot, a water stain on the ceiling that reminded him of the exit wound of a hollow point bullet.

The commander stiffened back up and pushed out a grin. “The guys are already planning a big blowout bash for your retirement the next time they’re back stateside. Rigs told me to tell you that—”

“What about the girl?” Killian asked. His voice was empty. His eyes remained fixed on the water spot.

“The girl?” the commander asked.

Killian’s head snapped toward the officer. Their eyes locked. “The girl from the house. The girl who was in my fucking arms when the RPG hit. The fucking Yazidi sex slave girl, for fuck’s sake.”

The commander grabbed the bed’s side rail and leaned in closer. “Hey, Kill, take it easy, shipmate. Try not to think about any of that shit right now, okay? You just listen to your doctors and focus on your—”

Killian sprang up on one elbow. “Try not to think about her? How the hell do you expect me to do that, Commander, when she is all I can think about? All I can see in my mind is her in my arms right before the explosion. Her dark eyes blank, seeing nothing but the horror I was carrying her away from.”

“I-I don’t know what happened to her,” the commander confessed. “I’m sorry, Kill.”

“Jesus fucking Christ. I am so sick of hearing everyone being so goddamned sorry for me.”

The commander released the side rail as if they were electrically charged and took a step back from the bed. He saw a look in his senior chief’s eyes that he had never seen before, one that exceeded even the intensity he was known for on the battlefield.

The commander pushed back. “Come on, Senior Chief,” he said, his voice resuming its tone of authority. “Cut the dramatics. You know damn well how much we care for you. And I’m sure if you thought about it, you’d realize just how tore up we all are about losing you. That fucking blast didn’t just rob us of a leader and our team’s fiercest killer. That fucker robbed us of a shipmate, a brother, god damn it.”

The tough love worked. Killian ran his fingers through his thick blond hair and sighed. His anger drained away and he once again lay back into the pillow.

“Look, Kill,” the commander said, his tone softened. “I’m here for a day-long spec ops conference beginning tomorrow at the Pentagon and then I’m heading right back to...” He laughed, giving in. “You’re right, it is Yemen. But, still, when I get back in country, I’ll do my damndest to find out what happened to the girl, okay? I have a pretty good relationship with a commander in the Kurdish Peshmerga. If I can track him down, he should have some idea how the Yazidi refugees are processed.”

Killian looked at his superior officer. “Thanks, boss,” he said softly. “Tell the guys I said hey.”

The commander gave the side rail two quick taps with his large Naval Academy class ring announcing his departure. “Roger that, shipmate,” he said, and then turned and left the room.

Killian’s eyes returned to the ceiling and once again locked onto the water mark shaped like a bullet wound.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

So, what does he do with all his babes when he's through with them?" Henderson asked as he pulled the Escalade into its reserved parking space. He powered off the ignition and turned in his seat to face McKnight with the look an inquisitive child might have when inquiring about the mysteries of the Easter Bunny.

McKnight unbuckled his seatbelt and sighed impatiently. "Why are you always talking about DeBlanc's girls? Jesus, Happy, use your imagination. The man's a billionaire. He can dispose of them any way he sees fit." He opened the door. "Besides, you'll see how it works soon enough. He grows tired of them fast." He exited the SUV and began to give it a walk around to ensure its shine was still intact after the ride home from the car wash.

Henderson hopped out of the car and nearly ran into his partner at the corner of the back bumper. McKnight grumbled at him and continued inspecting the vehicle.

"Well, for one thing," Henderson said, following in behind McKnight, "Little Louie isn't a billionaire. His daddy is. And for another thing, it makes me sick to my stomach that the only reason all those hot babes are with that little mother fucker instead of me is *because* of his daddy's money."

McKnight could tell Henderson was working himself up into another one of his longwinded and inane diatribes. It wasn't the first time since taking him on as his partner that McKnight had wished Lazlo hadn't fucked up the way he had. Unlike Henderson, Lazlo didn't talk nonstop about the most stupid bullshit. In fact, Lazlo hardly ever spoke at all, often working entire shifts without saying anything more than what was necessary to complete their assigned tasks, which usually only required one or two-word responses. McKnight missed that.

Henderson continued. "I mean, what is it about money that makes us humans behave so irrationally, so counter to our basic human nature?"

McKnight remained silent as he stepped up onto the sun-bleached, wooden-planked walkway that led to the private pier.

Henderson continued with his point after realizing McKnight wasn't going to offer a response. "Hell, if it wasn't for money and the entire societal construct centered

around an arbitrary concept of right and wrong fabricated centuries ago in the guise of (here he raised up his hands and air quoted with his fingers) “*civilization*” for the singular purpose to protect the rich and all their fabulous riches—”

“Look, Happy, I’m all for you going to night school to better yourself and all that. But that doesn’t mean I want you to barf up your latest required reading assignment all over me after each class.”

Henderson took the criticism in stride. “Yeah but, if it wasn’t for *civilization* with its rule of law and all that other bullshit, each and every one of those beautiful honeys DeBlanc has *purchased* would have, as evolution has dictated in every species without a thinking brain, been *unable* to resist guys like us because they instinctively know that we are the alpha males of the pack, the ones best equipped to protect and to further propagate our species.”

McKnight reached the end of the pier and stopped. He turned around to face Henderson and gave him a *What the fuck are you talking about?* look. He then turned back around to take in the grandeur of the setting sun and the gulf’s color-splashed tranquility.

Henderson stood next to McKnight and continued to harp on his point, unaffected by the richness of the natural wonders erupting before his eyes. “But instead of all these babes following the natural order of things, *civilization*, working hard at the behest of the rich, has reprogrammed them to respond sexually, not to the most virile, physically attractive men like us with the biggest muscles and...” he gave McKnight a nudge and a nod of the head, “...the biggest babymakers, but to the so-called men with the biggest wallets.”

McKnight took out his binoculars. The yacht was still anchored far off in the distance, its helicopter idle on its helipad. He brought his sights in closer. The boat reserved as a shuttle for the executive staff had just gotten underway from the resort’s private, executive staff pier.

“And what has happened to guys like us in the process?” Henderson asked rhetorically, for he had no expectation now of McKnight making any significant contributions to the discussion. “Well, of course, we have become effectively neutered, our balls snipped right the fuck off. And now, just like all of DeBlanc’s babes, we are ourselves purchased, our muscles and our might serving to protect him and his riches. We, too, are complicit in the propagating of this most unnatural and emasculating capitalistic system.” He put his arm around McKnight’s broad shoulders. “You and me, Big Mack... nothing but high-paid eunuchs, prostituting our services to the highest bidder.”

McKnight pulled the binoculars away from his eyes and gave Henderson a look that was easily understood to say, *Get your fucking arm off my shoulders.*

Henderson quickly obliged the look.

## THE GOOD KILL

McKnight put the binoculars back to his eyes and returned to scanning the horizon. He had previously spotted a speck through the evening haze that he made out to be a western-bound oil tanker, but now he had lost it.

Henderson ran his fingers through his long hair and smoothed out his ponytail. "All I'm saying, Mack, is that Jesus was right when he said that the meek will inherit the Earth. But what he was wrong about was how their ascendancy would go down."

McKnight sighed. "Dude. Seriously, give it a fucking break. You act like we're doomed as a species all because raping and pillaging has fallen out of custom."

Henderson nodded his head while giving McKnight's response serious consideration. "Well, it's not just that... But to finish my point, where Jesus was wrong was in the execution. He supposed the pacification of the strong would come about through a religion founded in his name. The way I see it, it wasn't even close. Sure, Christianity had a role in taking away men's balls, and so did the other major faith-based religions. But the real pacification of warriors like us, and the real obliterator of the universal concepts of *survival of the fittest* and *might makes right*, concepts coded into our DNA by *Natural Law*, was through the codification of the *unnatural* Rule of Law, a religion established to worship and protect the God of Coin. It was weak man's love of the money, not his love of Christ that enabled the meek to inherit the Earth, which eventually castrated and subjugated warriors like us into ballless slaves whose only purpose now is to serve our capitalistic masters..."

McKnight picked up the tanker again. It was too far off the coast to see what flag it was flying under, but it was certain to be headed to a Texas refinery, probably Port Arthur. He followed the ship, fondly recalling the days of his youth before joining the army, when he would spend his summers working his uncle's shrimp boat. He hated shrimping, but he loved it out there on the water and always wondered why he decided to enlist in the army and not the navy. He had to laugh to himself when realizing the answer. Probably because he wanted to live the life of a warrior whose demise Happy was now mourning over and wouldn't shut up about.

Their shuttle was only a few hundred yards from the pier now. McKnight put his binoculars away and turned to Henderson and, despite his better judgement for he knew it would only egg the annoying pedant further on, said, "So, you're trying to tell me that all the benefits to mankind that civilization has brought us is a bad thing? Unnatural?" he asked as the two men walked toward the landing.

Henderson scoffed. "Obviously, it's unnatural. All you have to do is watch a nature show to see how might always makes right in the animal kingdom. But don't get me wrong, I'm not necessarily saying a civil society is all bad."

The two large men said their hellos to Watkins, the shuttle helmsman, as they hopped onto the boat, a thirty-five-foot Formula 350 Sun Sport. The craft pitched from their weight and they had to grab hold of chairbacks as they made their way aft. Watkins pulled away from the pier and arced back around toward the resort. McKnight plopped

down on the bench that ran the length of the stern. Henderson plopped down next to him and picked up his point right where he left off.

“What I’m saying, Big Mack, is that sometimes it takes everything I have to hold back from knocking the shit out these little thin-armed capitalists who think they can own me.” He had to holler to speak over the wind and the three, roaring 350-horsepower outboard engines.

McKnight spread his arms over the back of the bench. “DeBlanc may be a prissy little prick,” he said, “but he takes good care of me. I have no complaints.” His deep voice was consumed by the noise.

Henderson pointed to his left ear and shrugged his shoulders. He then leaned in close to McKnight’s mouth and McKnight repeated himself. Henderson then shifted his mouth over to McKnight’s ear and said, “That’s exactly my point, Big Mack. We’re both being well-kept by Petite Louie. He takes care of us, just as he does Ruby Black and the rest of his babes.”

“So, you’re calling me a whore now,” McKnight said into Henderson’s ear.

“That’s just it,” Henderson said back at McKnight’s ear. “Capitalists have made whores out of all of us.”

McKnight threw his head back and laughed. He then looked at Henderson and said, “Didn’t they pin a Silver Star on your chest for defending our American Way of Life and its capitalistic system over in Afghanistan? Since when did you become such a fucking communist?”

Henderson, unsmiling, leaned back into McKnight’s ear and said, “To be honest, I don’t know what I am, Mack, except a whore for our corrupt and oppressive system. One of these days I’m going to be the motherfucking man and then, let me tell you, there’s going to be some hell to pay.”

The boat docked at the resort’s staff-only slip and both men patted Watkins on the back as they hopped up onto the pier.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### BEFORE

Diego was never fond of having to leave his retreat, The Better Angels of Gettysburg. Established by him after he left the priesthood in 1991, initially as a secluded and safe place where victims of sexual assault committed by Catholic priests, at the time a relatively small cohort of unfortunate souls courageous enough to seek treatment, could find peace, solemnity, and healing. But gradually, through government grants, generous donations, word of mouth of the retreat's efficacy, and growing awareness of the issue of sexual assault, not just within the Catholic community, but throughout all walks of life, the mission, staff, and property of The Better Angels had grown significantly over the years to where now *all* victims of sexual crimes were accommodated, regardless of religious affiliation. And as the retreat grew, so too did Diego's attachment to it and his duties as its director and lead spiritual advisor. Which was why he was not fond of having to spend time away from his life's mission; he was even less fond of having to leave it when it involved him having to cross the southern border into Maryland and having to drive anywhere near Interstate 270 or the Capital Beltway.

Growing up in Mexico on a small family farm in a rural village on the outskirts of the Chihuahua Desert, Diego, a short and slender man, but one whose presence exuded a powerful sense of peace and serenity, never did become accustomed to the aggressive and unpredictable drivers found in the U.S. Normally, he wouldn't make two trips a year down to Maryland, so the fact that he was making his second trip down that way in such a short span of time was a testimony to how important Killian was to him. Still, his devotion to the wounded warrior didn't make the trip from Gettysburg to Bethesda any less stressful on his sixty-five-year-old, ill-conditioned heart.

Consequently, despite the purpose of his visit, he was greatly relieved when he finally pulled his old Honda Civic into the parking lot of the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. After he parked his car and powered down the engine, he sat back in his seat to gather his nerves, not just from the stressful drive, but also for the

strength he needed to deliver the unhappy news that he had been unable to deliver during his last sad visit to the hospital.

Killian was lying in a fetal position facing toward the door. A pang of sorrow shot through Diego's heart as he saw the pained expression on his friend's sleeping face. What horrors were haunting him, Diego wondered. He closed the door behind him and, with a heavy heart, walked quietly to the bed, wanting to be as close as possible to his longtime friend, to sit beside him and pray as he slept. However, the guest chairs against the wall by the door were unavailable. One had a full duffel bag lying across it, and the other had a large cardboard box setting on it filled with what looked to be military-related items – a lacquered wooden plaque in the shape of a shield, a decorative wooden box with a folded American flag and military medals set beneath glass, and several white binders and blue folders, among several other items unknown to him. He had no choice but to sit in the recliner next to the window instead. When he sat down, careful not to make any noise so as not to wake Killian, he found the view out the window to be uninspiring. The hospital was undergoing major renovations so the view, set amidst the backdrop of low, gray clouds, was consumed by scaffolding, cranes, large trucks, and heavy-booted construction workers plying their trade and stirring up large wafts of dust.

He turned from the window and sat forward in the chair, folding his hands together and placing them on his lap. After taking in a deep, relaxing breath and releasing it slowly, he closed his eyes, bowed his head, and prayed to God, asking Him for guidance and the strength to deliver his message to Killian with clarity and compassion. He prayed his hardest when asking God to heal Killian, to remove his pain and suffering and replace it with His blessing and grace. Afterwards, Diego leaned back into the chair and once again took in a deep breath in an effort to breathe away the tension in his forehead and shoulders that had accumulated from the weight of his burden.

\* \* \*

Diego woke with a start in a room silent and dark. Not knowing where he was, he looked out the window next to him as he gathered his bearings. Night had fallen, leaving the clouds visible now only as bruised patches of purples and blacks. The construction site was shadowed and still, the scaffolding looking skeletal against the hollow shell of the partially built building. Remembering where he was, Diego looked toward the bed. Killian was staring at him through the dark.

"Killian, oh my. I'm sor— I..." Diego struggled to stand up from the deep, comfortable chair. "I didn't mean to fall asleep." He reached to turn on the lamp near his chair.

"I prefer you didn't turn the light on," Killian said without emotion.

Diego's hand hung in the air for a moment, as if it were uncertain who to obey. Finally, he dropped it to his side and walked over to Killian's bed. With his heart racing, he asked, "How are you feeling, son?"

Killian stared straight ahead and said, "Pretty fucked."

Diego had never heard Killian swear before. The vulgar response, sounding ugly and raw, confused him at first, leaving him unable to understanding its meaning. "I-I see... yes. Yes. I'm sure things must be—"

"All the meds they have me on, they fuck me up." Killian said as he looked at Diego. "But that's not why I'm fucked. Do you want to know why I'm so fucked, Father?"

Diego shifted from foot to foot, not knowing what to say. He pointed to the chairs next to the bed. "Do you mind if I move this duffel bag? Maybe lean it against the wall? I'd like to sit down."

"It's a seabag," Killian said.

"Excuse me?" Diego asked quickly, Killian's dark mood already having him on edge.

"You said you wanted to move the duffel bag. In the navy, we call it a seabag. So, yeah, go ahead and move it."

Diego laughed nervously. "Oh, okay. I see. The seabag." After leaning the seabag against the wall, he slid the chair next to the bed and sat down. "There we go. That's better."

Killian stared at Diego a long time before asking, "Are you going to answer my question, Father?"

Diego didn't know what to do, what to say. He had never seen Killian behave like this. Like the Stoics of the West, or the Zen Masters of the East, Killian, even in his youth, always had a moderate temperament, never allowing his emotions to run strong in any direction. Diego never saw nor heard of Killian intimidating or bullying anyone like it seemed he was doing to him now. It was if Killian were someone else, someone whose heart had grown cold and bitter, someone who didn't know Diego or understand how much Diego cared for him.

Even though Diego knew that Killian's odd behavior was the result of either his physical injuries or a psychological trauma, or both, he still had a hard time managing his own reaction to it. As a former priest and as a longtime spiritual advisor, he had been in many similar situations where he had to provide comfort and counsel to someone who had recently suffered a severely traumatic experience and who was not yet receptive to outside help. Yet, never had he been so close personally to any of the suffering individuals he had counseled as he was with Killian. Yet he knew he had to take control of the situation immediately or it would soon, once again, devolve beyond the point to where Killian would be able to process effectively what it was Diego had to tell him.

"Killian listen to me. I really want to understand what it is that is troubling you, but I'm afraid before we discuss that, I need to tell you something that is going to be painful

for you to hear, something which has been heavy on my heart for quite some time.” He shifted in his chair and then slid it closer to the bed. “Killian, your father... there’s been a—”

“He’s dead,” Killian said flatly.

Diego felt as if he had been punched in the gut. “You knew? How?” He shifted in his chair again. “When I spoke to your doctor about it, she said you hadn’t been told.”

“And it wasn’t an accident either,” Killian said.

“Your father’s death? There was the fire. What do you mean it wasn’t an accident?”

Killian ignored the question. “But you know what? That’s not why I’m fucked either, Father,” he said reverting back to his earlier point. He nodded absently toward his navy gear. “You see that seabag over there and all that shit packed in that box? That’s why I’m fucked.”

Diego couldn’t keep up. It seemed as if Killian was having conversations with multiple people. “Killian, please...”

“All that shit over there is nothing but the relics of a life, a livelihood, now gone.”

Diego sat back in his chair. He felt exasperated, overwhelmed. Perhaps he was too close to Killian. Perhaps someone else should be the one to help the troubled man process the information of his father’s death, to help him cope with his new reality. He closed his eyes for a moment and tried to clear his head. No. It had to be him. He couldn’t pass this responsibility off to someone else just because it pained him too much to see Killian in such a tormented state. He had to be there for his friend no matter how hard the process or how long it took. When he opened his eyes again, he asked, “Killian, can you help me understand why the things on the chair are causing you such distress?”

Killian laughed sardonically. “Distress? You think all that shit on the chair is causing me distress? Is that what you think?”

“I don’t know what to think, Killian. I’m trying to understand what’s troubling you, that’s all.”

“You know what I understand now that I’m sure you don’t, Father, despite all your religious teachings?”

The shift yet again in the conversation’s direction made Diego’s head pound. He felt drained, weak. He rested his elbows on his knees and hung his head. “No, I don’t, Killian. Please tell me. What is it that I don’t understand and you do?”

Killian rolled over onto his side and tucked himself up into the fetal position, this time facing away from Diego. He placed a pillow over his head and held it tightly in place with his right arm. With his voice sounding muffled and distant from beneath the pillow, he shouted, “Hell!”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Toni was sitting in the Fantasy Plus dressing room alone when the door opened and Jerome Savage strutted in with one of his dancers tight on his arm.

“There’s my girl,” Savage said, his arms and smile spread wide. He was wearing a black Baltimore Ravens ball cap cocked to the side, a black and gray Under Armor half-zip pullover jacket with a Ravens logo, black sweatpants, and black Adidas Originals with purple stripes. He put his arm back around the dancer. “Toni, this is the one and only Cheri DaBom, Fantasy Plus’s main attraction. She has kindly agreed to help you learn her... art.” He looked at Cheri and winked as a hand strayed from the small of the dancer’s back down to her sufficient backside, a backside barely contained within a pair of white skinny jeans, and gave it a squeeze. Cheri let out a playful squeal and slid her hand down to Savage’s backside to give it a reciprocating squeeze of her own.

Toni remained silent, distant, as if they weren’t even in the room with her.

“Okay now,” Savage said seriously, “I want you two to, you know, spend a couple minutes getting to know each other and all that, then get your big beautiful booties out there on the stage and show me what you can do with them, all right?”

“Oh, you know what I can do, Thug Killa,” Cheri said, eyeing Savage seductively.

“Oh, you know I do, girl,” Savage said. “Now I want you to be real nice to our young miss thang here and school her proper, you feel me? Teach her to do that move you do that I like.”

Cheri giggled. “You know ain’t no one can do you like Miss Cheri can, Killa.”

Savage laughed lustfully and allowed his hands to roam freely over the tight, athletic body of his star performer before pulling himself away. He walked to the door and looked at his steel and gold, Cosmograph Daytona Rolex watch. “Okay, it’s now ten-thirty,” he said. “I’m gonna grab me some breakfast and then I want to see Toni on the stage by eleven showing me her stuff, you hear me? And I mean *all* her stuff.” He winked at the ladies and left the room.

Cheri watched the door for a moment before turning toward Toni, who sat at the vanity desk staring at her own reflection in the trifold mirror.

“So, like Hollywood said, my name is Cheri,” Cheri said as she looked in the mirror and gently patted her pink, tight afro into shape. She then smoothed out her pink lipstick with an index finger, careful of the press-on fingernails that curved out like long, pink claws. When Toni didn’t respond she began searching through her large, light-pink purse until she came up with a tube of lipstick. She carefully applied another pink layer on her full lips and then rubbed them together, spreading it evenly. She smiled at herself and then at Toni. Toni didn’t reciprocate the affection.

Cheri pulled the chair from the adjacent vanity desk and sat down. She took Toni’s hands in hers and said, “Look, girlfriend, I’m not gonna try and get all Oprah on your ass, but you’re gonna have to snap out of whatever funk you’re in and work with me. You heard him, Hollywood’s given us a job to do and I’ll be damned if I’m gonna get that mother fucker pissed at me just because you decided you gonna sit here and feel sorry for yourself.”

For the first time, Toni looked at Cheri.

“Look, we all got our reasons for doing what we do,” Cheri said, softening. “I’m not looking to find out what yours are but what I do know is that Hollywood’s got an interest in you and when that man’s got an interest in someone, it can be either a good thing... or a very bad thing. So, what do you say we work together to make sure we keep him happy, okay?”

Tears welled fast in the corner of Toni’s eyes and began running down her cheeks.

Cheri pouted her pink lips and hugged Toni. “Oh girlfriend, don’t cry. You need to be putting a smile on the beautiful face of yours.” She pulled back from her hug. “And mama’s got just what you need.”

After digging through her purse again, she pulled out a small glass vial and held it before Toni as if it were a birthday gift for a child. “Now looky what mama has here for us.” She sprinkled a power out from the vial into two lines on the desk. “Hollywood gave this to me. Said he wanted me to share it with you. Now tell me, isn’t that just the sweetest thing?” She unzipped her knockoff Coach Signature wallet and flipped through her bills until she found one crisp enough to do the job she had in mind for it. She rolled it up tight. “Time to take your happy medicine, sweet thing,” she said as she handed the makeshift straw to Toni.

Toni took the rolled-up five-dollar bill and snorted both lines of the cocaine. The drug exploded into her bloodstream and sent its magic straight to her brain. Within seconds, she could feel her pain and sadness melt away from the bright, hot adrenaline and its accompanying joy that spread hot and delicious throughout her body. She pinched and wiped at her nose and then looked at Cheri with her beautiful, drug-induced smile.

“Damn, girl. Look at you,” Cheri said, pleased with her role in Toni’s newfound happiness. “I guess our little miss thing here wants to play.” She shook out two more lines from the vial. “Well, guess what. Mama wants to play, too,” she said with a giggle.

## THE GOOD KILL

She took the rolled-up bill and snorted away one of the lines. "There it is. That's what mama was looking for," she said as she leaned her head back and closed her eyes reverently.

Cheri handed the rolled-up bill back to Toni. "One more dip into happiness for our lovely Miss Toni, and then it's time for us to get down to business and learn you how to turn that sexy ass of yours into a straight up money-making machine..."

\* \* \*

Savage sat at Blackman's desk watching the security feed from the dressing room of Toni and Cheri doing the cocaine that Savage had given them. Blackman walked in and set a Styrofoam carryout box down on the desk.

Savage opened the box and began eating his breakfast. He nodded to the monitor showing Cheri and Toni practicing dance moves. "Looks like that coke did the trick," he said.

Blackman wheeled a chair next to his boss and sat down. He set his carryout box on his lap and began eating and watching. Cheri was behind Toni, close, her hands placed on Toni's hips, moving her along in a slow grind.

"Damn that's hot," Savage said with a mouthful of scrambled eggs. "Is she kissing on her neck?"

Blackman didn't answer, focusing instead on eliminating his thick stack of buttermilk pancakes.

Cheri spun Toni around and stepped back, still swaying her hips to the beat of a music unheard by Savage or Blackman.

"You know, Black, I'm beginning to have second thoughts about farming this bitch out," Savage said. He nodded to the monitor. "Miss College Girl here turns me on in ways her freak sister never did."

Blackman looked at his boss. "That's because she's fresh. And you know how much more that makes her worth on the market. And you know that we need to get her sold and out of area before someone comes looking for her, just like she came looking for Ruby." He stuffed another massive forkful of cakes into his mouth. "But, hey, until then, enjoy her while you can, you know."

"Oh, I am, believe me," Savage said. "But you're telling me shit I already know. What you're not telling me is when that little hacker mother fucker you got on a leash... What the fuck you call him? Jed? Zed? Whatever the fuck it is. When is that geek mother fucker gonna get me the shit I'm looking for?"

Blackman permitted himself an uncharacteristic chuckle. "His handle is Dread Onyx," he said slowly, as if instructing a child. "But like most hackers, he spells it in a fucked-up way: d-r-3-4-d-o-n-y-x."

Savage chuckled himself. "Dread mother fucking onyx. What the fuck kind of bullshit name is that.

"More Millennial bullshit," Blackman said. "The point is, it's going to take him some time, Mr. Savage, to do the things we hired him to do. These dark web sites are built by some of the smartest black hat fuckers there are. And they're built to evade the smartest and most sophisticated government white hat spooks. Our guy's good but his specialty is online identity theft, not this shit we got him doing."

"Black hats, White hats. Dark mother fucking web. All this geek-ass shit means nothing to me," Savage said while giving Blackman a look that said he was now serious. "All that does mother fucking matter to me is the god damn name of Ruby's mother fucking buyer. You feeling me, Black? Because if that mother fucker was willing to pay as much as he did for Ruby, I'm damn sure he'll pay a hell of a lot more for Ruby's mother fucking twin sister, especially if he knows how fresh she'll be coming in."

"We'll find him for you, Mr. Savage," Blackman said. "But you know, if we go outside the auction site directly to a buyer, there's a possibility we could get banned from future sales if it's discovered."

"Fuck that site. Probably some punk-ass Russian pervert running that thing out of his mama's basement. I'm sure if you look hard enough, you'll find at least a dozen more just like it."

"Well, these sites are hard to get access to. And I'm not so sure we'd be able to find another one with a clientele list like the one we're on now."

"Shut the fuck up about it, Black, and just get me the shit I'm asking for."

Blackman chewed his food and nodded obediently.

The men watched in silence as Cheri began to take her clothes off while swaying her body to a silent beat. She was speaking to Toni, seemingly instructing her to begin undressing.

"We really need to get some audio pickups in there," Savage said. "It'd make this little show here much more interesting."

When both ladies were down to their underwear and bras, Savage said, "Okay, let's go out front. I want to watch the rest of this show live and in the flesh."

"So, you're going to make her dance then? Earn for you until we can offload her?" Blackman asked as he held the door open for his boss.

"Oh, hell yeah. Look at that bitch's body. That ass is off the hook. Can't pass up the cheddar that work of art will bring in for me," Savage said as he walked out of the room.

Blackman closed up the office and then followed Savage to the front of the club. "What about pulling tricks?" he asked as he fell in step behind Savage.

"TBD, Black. TBD."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The teal and gray, eight-seater, MD-902 helicopter with “Half Moon Island Resort” emblazoned in bright white letters on both its sides landed softly on the resort’s rooftop helipad. McKnight, hunched over, rushed out to the bird to open the hatch and lower the stairs. He made eye contact with the pilot, Sticks Dowdy, a former army Blackhawk pilot, and gave him a short nod of the head, which Sticks returned in kind. Ruby Black leaned out from the hatch and stood on the top step for a moment as she took in the spectacular beauty of the gulf. Her honey-brown skin glowed red and her roller set afro, bouncing playfully around her face from the helicopter’s prop wash, showed its amber highlights from the rays of a sun set halfway below the horizon.

McKnight offered Ruby his hand. When she placed hers in his, his heart leapt from the shock that pulsed through his body from her warm, soft, electrifying touch. As she descended the steps, she looked down upon him and smiled. A second shockwave pulsed through his body, leaving him feeling slightly dizzy, giddy, like a hormone-wracked schoolboy. He was afraid he held onto her hand a bit too long when she reached the bottom of the steps. He reluctantly let her go and turned to wait for DeBlanc. She offered him another one of her bright, enslaving smiles as a way of thanks.

Louis Alexander DeBlanc the Fourth popped his head out of the hatch. The stylish cut of his thinning, light brown hair was immediately blown amiss from the prop wash, giving his too long of face with its too small of eyes and too large of nose the look of a disheveled and misplaced low-level bureaucrat instead of that of a suave and manicured top-level executive, a look in which he invested much money and effort to try to maintain. He sped down the steps and gave McKnight a benevolent nod as he passed. Ruby, a head taller than the billionaire in her Casadei stiletto-heeled pumps, latched herself onto his arm and straightened his hair for him as together they walked to their private elevator where Henderson was standing by holding the door open for them. As the couple entered the elevator, DeBlanc gave Henderson the same nod he gave to McKnight, whereas his elegant consort gave him a generous offering of her heart-melting smile.

After the door closed and the two men were alone on the roof, Henderson turned to McKnight with a wide grin and arched eyebrows, his head shaking in disbelief.

“Stop,” McKnight ordered. “I know exactly what you’re going to say because you say the same damn thing every time you see her.”

Henderson laughed. “Guilty as charged.” He slapped McKnight on the back. “But goddamn, Mack. She is a stone-cold fox, isn’t she? It just breaks my heart to know she’s going to waste on that little fucking troll.”

McKnight looked up at the security camera as he held the door to the stairs open for his partner. As they hustled their way down the stairwell, their heavy, clamoring feet echoing loudly throughout, McKnight said, “It’s a goddamned good thing those security cameras don’t pick up audio, Happy, or both our asses would end up just as fucked as Lazlo’s, if not worse.”

Henderson punched in the key code and, after the lock released, returned the courtesy by holding the door to the floor of the penthouse suite open for McKnight. As McKnight passed, Henderson said, “How the hell could anyone’s fate be worse than Lazlo’s?” He pulled the door shut and made sure it was secure before trotting down the short hall to catch up with McKnight.

“Well, if anyone ever were to find Lazlo, which they won’t I can assure you, they at least would find him all in one piece,” McKnight said as he pressed the service elevator’s down button, its only option. He looked at the security camera over the closed, gilded door directly across from the elevator as if to make sure it wasn’t listening in. In a hushed voice, he said, “If DeBlanc ever caught wind of all the shit you talk about him, I doubt he’d afford you the same courtesy he afforded Lazlo.”

A bell rang and then the similarly gilded doors of the elevator slid open. McKnight stepped in. “I’ll be back to relieve you... Let’s see...” He checked his Timex Ironman Triathlon watch. “It’s 20:17, so I’ll be back up at 22:17 on the button. In the meantime, text me if you need anything or if the boss’s plans change.” The doors closed.

Henderson stretched his back briefly and then took his position next to the door of DeBlanc’s penthouse suite, wishing it were him inside with Ruby Black instead of his rich, thin-armed boss.

\* \* \*

Ruby Black walked up to DeBlanc as he shaved and hugged him from behind, her naked breasts pressed against his bare upper back, her brown hands, standing out against his white skin, began caressing his narrow, hairless chest. Their eyes met in the mirror.

“How come you’re not taking me to Houston with you tomorrow, lover?” Ruby asked, her large, exotic eyes sad, her voice pouty.

## THE GOOD KILL

DeBlanc pulled up the end of his nose with his left thumb and concentrated as he shaved beneath it. When he moved on to easier terrain, he said, "Because I don't want you to be bored having to wait around for me while I'm in my meeting with my father, that's why."

She nibbled on his ear and then whispered into it. "I don't mind being bored for you."

DeBlanc shaved his neck with long, upward strokes. "I think you going to Houston has less to do with me and more to do with you getting to fly on my private jet."

Ruby smiled seductively. "But I've never flown on a private jet before, lover."

"Soon enough, I promise," he said with disinterest as he inspected his shave. "I'll have you chauffeured downtown tomorrow after I fly out so you can spend the afternoon shopping New Orleans' finest stores for whatever it is your pretty little heart desires. I'll be gone for only a few hours and when I get back, we'll go out for a nice dinner. How does that sound?"

"But we just did all that today. Are you sure the real reason you're not taking me with you is because daddy's poor, sensitive eyes couldn't handle the sight of a woman as colorful as me on the arm of his heir apparent?" Her hands moved on from DeBlanc's chest to more southern parts of his body.

DeBlanc took a folded white towel from the countertop and wiped the remaining cream from his face. "You got that right," he said seriously. "Not only are my daddy's poor eyes too sensitive, but I'm quite sure if he knew of my preference for beautiful black women such as you, his poor, sensitive heart would just break from disappointment."

"And I suppose that's the same reason why you made me wait in the SUV with your guards today instead of letting me attend the hospital ceremony with you," Ruby said, again in her pouty voice.

DeBlanc walked abruptly away from her. "No," he said coldly. "The reason I didn't take you with me to the ceremony wasn't because you're black, it was because you're a whore. A very expensive whore who I purchased from a very exclusive website that auctions off other expensive whores just like you." He stood before his dresser and began putting on a Jaeger-LeCoultre watch with a pink gold rectangular face and chocolate-colored alligator skin strap. After winding the watch, he put on a pinky ring, which was a simple gold band that at one time was his deceased grandmother's wedding ring. Finally, he put on a thin gold necklace with a small gold cross, which the same deceased grandmother had received as a gift for her First Communion.

As he donned the necklace, he looked at Ruby through the angled section of the mirror and said, "So, how about instead of us focusing on the things you can't do because you're a whore, we focus on the things you can do because you're a whore, like putting on that sexy little two-thousand-dollar dress I just bought for you, and then accompanying me to dinner and allowing your beauty and your breasts to distract the slobbery Bulgarian whom we'll be dining with so that I can secure from him the best

possible terms as he and I begin the negotiation for the contract of the hotel he wants me to build for him.” After his little outburst, he gave her a smile absent of any humor or warmth. “Is that something a whore like you can do for me, Ruby?” Without waiting for a response, he walked into his closet.

If what DeBlanc had just said affected Ruby in any way, she didn’t show it. She just followed in right behind him. Inside the closet, she stopped him from flipping through his vast wardrobe and pulled him close to her. “Of course, it would be my pleasure to do that for you, lover,” she said before leaning down to kiss him deeply. She pulled off the towel that was wrapped around his waist and let it fall to the floor. “And there’s one other thing I would be happy to do for you, too,” she said as she dropped slowly to her knees and began kissing her way down his body.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### BEFORE

The snow flurries kicked up again and were being driven horizontally across the northbound stretch of Interstate 270 by the late December sub-freezing winds. Diego slowed down his already slow pace and tightened his already tight grip on the steering wheel, around which his normally brown-skinned knuckles shined white. Had he been able to take his concentration from the slushy and slick road before him, he would have realized that his entire body was as tense and tight as was his grip on the wheel. It stayed that way until the snow and wind had finally abated soon after they had passed through Frederick, Maryland and were heading north on U. S. Route 15.

Diego drove in a heightened state for some time, even after the weather had calmed, before realizing that the conditions were no longer as perilous as they recently had been. As he unclenched himself from his complete concentration on the road, he glanced over at Killian staring out the passenger window. He had been silent since leaving the hospital. Diego wondered what he was thinking and if he should risk interrupting his thoughts to engage him in conversation. Leading up to his release from the hospital, Killian had shown occasional glimpses of his old self. While never discussing anything too personal or related to the extent of his injuries, Killian had been willing to talk with Diego about the more mundane things in his life, mostly regarding the goings on around him in the hospital. However, most of the time they spent together during Diego's visits was in silence, either while in concentration over a chess match, or while each read their books and magazines, or while Killian just lay in bed and Diego just sat in quiet contemplation.

Diego could only wonder about the cause of the change in Killian's behavior because Killian never offered any explanation. And Killian's doctor wasn't much help either since Diego wasn't an immediate family member and Killian never authorized the doctor to discuss his condition with anyone. All the doctor could tell Diego was that, due to Killian's brain injury, there would always be the risk of dramatic mood swings and erratic behavior. Diego had tried several times to broach the subject of Killian's injuries,

but Killian would always grow irritable whenever he did, so he never pressed. Based on Killian's reactions to questions regarding his own health, Diego never felt comfortable enough to again bring up the topic of the death of Killian's father.

What Killian had said about his father's death, that it was no accident, had weighed heavy on Diego's mind and he thought about it often. Perhaps now it was time to bring it back up. He cleared his throat to speak but then had second thoughts. Or maybe it was best not to bring up such a demanding subject on an already demanding day for Killian. He let the moment slip by and continued on in silence.

When they passed the sign welcoming them into Cumberland Township, Killian's hometown where most of the Battle of Gettysburg was fought during the Civil War, Killian, for the first time during the long, slow trip turned from looking out the passenger-side window to looking over at Diego. "Tell me about my father's death," he said.

It wasn't long after they had crossed the border into Pennsylvania that the snow and the wind had picked back up, which meant that Diego was once again wholly focused on his driving. Killian's sudden and unexpected voice startled him and jarred his clenched, whole body concentration on the slippery road, causing him to jerk the wheel reflexively toward Killian. This caused the car's back end to go into a brief, sickening slide on a patch of ice before catching the asphalt again.

"Are you okay, Father?" Killian asked. "Why don't you let me drive us the rest of the way home? You must be exhausted."

Diego's heart was pounding violently from the scare. He wanted nothing more than to not be driving the car. "Oh, no. No, Killian. Everything's fine," he said, trying to sound as in control as he could. They passed a road sign announcing the Taneytown Road exit. "Look, two miles until our exit." He dared to take his eyes off the road just long enough to look at Killian and offer him a brave smile.

"You're right," Killian said. "We're almost there. We can talk about my father some other time."

"Well, I really..." Diego's eyes darted back and forth from Killian to the road. "Why don't you just come and stay with me? Tomorrow's Christmas Eve. It would be—"

"Please Father. We already talked about this."

"But Killian... With the main house burned down, who knows what state the old farm house is in it's been so long since anyone's been in it. I'm sure it's a dusty mess. I can't let you stay all alone in a dirty old house like that during Christmas."

Killian's voice turned hard. "I said we already talked about this, Father. I know my parents' house has burned down. I know the old farmhouse is probably a mess. I don't care, and I don't want to talk about it again."

Diego didn't respond, he just kept his stern eyes locked on the icy road ahead.

After a moment of silence, Killian took in a breath. When he released it and continued speaking, the tone in his voice had softened. "Look, Padre, you know I

practically lived in that old, beat-up farmhouse as a teenager, and that I spent most of my adult life as a SEAL living and sleeping in much worse conditions.” He laughed softly. “Besides, if a dirty old barn was a good enough place for the birth of Baby Jesus, then a dirty old farmhouse is good enough place for me on his birthday.”

Diego put his blinker on for the exit and smiled. “How can I argue with that?”

“You can’t. Besides, my shrink said it would be good for me to get settled as soon as possible. Get back to a routine.”

The snow had turned into an icy mix. As Diego turned right onto Taneytown Road, the tires spun before catching the asphalt, throwing a bolt of fear into his heart. He made a quick left onto Solomon Road, and quickly realized that the winding country road was in need of salt and a plow as the tires fishtailed hard on the turn.

It was a moment before Diego could speak again after gaining control, yet he was unable to calm the shaking in his voice. “So, what do you think your typical routine will be now that you’re... you know, a civilian?”

Killian thought about the question. “Well, as my father’s executor I’ll have to get his estate settled. But as for a routine, my main priority is to start working out as soon as possible. Need to get my edge back.”

“Get your edge back?” Diego asked looking at Killian, his concern for his friend’s health momentarily overriding his concern for the road, which was now barely discernible before him. “Killian, your heart. You can’t possibly be considering any strenuous activity.”

“Yes, believe me, Father, I know the risks,” Killian said, his anger rising. “The doctors went on and on about it. If I listened to them I’d never get out of bed from fear.”

“They nag about it because it’s serious. You should listen to them, Killian,” Diego said. He then said something in Spanish under his breath as he made a slow right turn onto White Church Road.

“Well, shouldn’t I also listen to my shrink?” Killian asked sarcastically. “He says I need to try to get back as close as I can to the life I had before the all the injuries. Well, my life before the blast was my job, and my job required me to be in top physical condition. The thing with my heart is what it is. I’m not going to let one tiny scrap of metal dictate how I live my life.”

Diego’s own heart was pounding more now from his frustration with Killian than from the perils he faced from the snow-covered road. He didn’t know how to respond without making them both more upset, so he remained silent and tightened his grip on the wheel.

Killian ran his hands through his long hair and leaned his head back on the headrest. The conversation was giving him a headache. The pain concentrated just over his left temple and throbbed with the rapid beating of his heart. His heightened level of anxiety – he refused to call these episodes that he now frequently experienced panic attacks – had him breathing in quick shallow breaths, had his hands shaking. The hot air blowing

out from the car's vents was suffocating him. He broke out in a cold and chilling sweat. He wanted out of the car. He needed fresh air. He couldn't breathe. He knew the way he was behaving was hurting his friend. He had to let go of the anger.

But it was hard. Because it was always there, the anger. Ever since waking from the coma it had such a tight, constant grip on him that he could barely breathe. And because it was something he had never experienced before it was especially hard for him to deal with. Anger, to him, had always been seen as a sign of weakness, especially when it was used, weaponized, as a means to physically intimidate others; whereas to him anger was really nothing more than an embarrassing display of one's inability to overcome a negative situation with a positive mindset. At least that was how he used to feel. Now he realized that there were some forms of anger – his anger – that were uncontrollable, uncontainable. He felt absolutely incapable of restraining it or doing anything about it, as it was always there somewhere within him, lurking, seething within his gut, his lungs, his heart, a low flame steadily burning like a pilot light that could easily, often for no apparent reason, light him up like an overheated furnace, its angry flames raging to the surface as a burning blinding madness that would consume him and make him want to thrash out heatedly at those nearest to him, no matter even if they happened to be those dearest to him.

His therapist had explained that the best way for him to release, or at least control, his anger was to understand and accept why it was there. The anger, for the most part, was not there of his doing, nor was it there of the doing of whomever or whatever it was that had triggered it. The anger was there because of *the blast*. It was the blast that hurt him, rewired him to be angry. And it was the blast he should be angry at, not his doctors, not Diego, not the world, not himself.

Killian squeezed his eyes shut and tried to visualize the blast as his anger. He watched from a safe distance in his mind as it exploded into a white hot blinding ball of unmitigated fury, and then fizzed away to nothing like a dying sparkler, leaving behind in him the sudden calm, a dark, timid calm, that only one who has ever survived the savage hell of battle could ever know.

When he opened his eyes some of the tension in his forehead had released. "You know, Father," he said calmly, "I really do appreciate everything you're doing for me. I know it hasn't been easy for you. I haven't been easy for you..." Killian had more to say but he wasn't sure how. As far back as he could remember Diego had been a presence in his life, a friend. Not just at the church or as his priest when Killian was a child, but later, after his mother's passing. Especially then. He owed Diego so much. He just didn't know how to put it into words just then.

Still, Diego's smile beamed through the dark of the car from what Killian had been able to say. "I'm just happy you'll be close now so I don't have to drive so far to lose to you at chess."

Killian allowed himself his own tight smile.

## THE GOOD KILL

Diego couldn't see the smile, but he could feel it and it filled him with a sense of joy that he hadn't felt since learning that Killian had come out of the coma. He turned right onto Rust Creek Road, now only a few miles from Killian's farm.

"Killian, do you remember when you and I first spoke about your father's death?"

"Why?" Killian asked flatly.

Diego felt the positive vibe evaporate from the car. "Never mind," he said quickly. "We don't need to talk about it now. Like you said, we're almost there anyway."

"You want to know how I knew my father was dead, right?"

"Yes. Yes." Diego said eagerly. "That, and why you feel his death wasn't an accident. I spoke with both the police detective at the scene and the fire ch—"

In his excitement to finally be discussing Luc Lebon's death with Killian, Diego began unconsciously to speed up. He was going too fast on the narrow, snow-covered road when the car came upon the one-way bridge that spanned Rust Creek, the muddy, iron-laden stream with its rust-colored banks that snaked its way through Killian's farm and into the vast countryside beyond. Overreacting to the bridge's sudden appearance, Diego slammed on the useless brakes. The car slid. He panicked and didn't hear Killian hollering at him to release the brakes and steer into the slide. He spun hard on the steering wheel in the opposite direction of the slide and slammed even harder on the brakes, so hard, in fact, something somewhere – his knee? his hip? his back? – something popped. A fiery pain stole his breath and exploded white before his eyes.

The car spun left, making not quite a full 360-degree spin, and plowed driver's side into the stone wall lining the right side of the bridge. Before coming to a full rest, the car lurched forward and slid down the steep, slick bank into the stream, not stopping until the front tires were sucked deep into its thick red mud.

The stream had come to a calm acceptance of the unnatural intrusion and lapped quietly at the tires as it passed. Killian awoke to these lapping sounds not knowing where he was, not knowing how long he had been knocked out. He hung forward, restrained from falling completely into the dashboard by his seatbelt. He remembered the car spinning then slamming hard into the wall. The car was illuminated by the phosphorescent blue glow from the snow-covered forest that loomed over the stream. Where his headache had throbbed before, it now was burning with pain. He touched the spot and found a hot, swollen lump with a thick gash running through it. His fingers came away sticky with blood. The passenger window, he saw, had a round crack in the middle of it where his head must have whipped back into it after the car slammed into the wall.

Killian remembered his friend and looked over at him. The former priest also hung from his seatbelt; however, he was unmoving, his body had gone limp. Blood was dripping, almost streaming, from his nostrils onto the steering wheel.

"Diego," Killian cried out. Still hanging by his seatbelt, he reached over and shook his old friend's shoulder. There was no response.

Kurt Brindley

*Astaghfirullah! Astaghfirullah! Astaghfirullah...*

THE GOOD KILL

END OF SAMPLE

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