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The Executioner

Written by Chris Carter

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The Executioner

Chris Carter



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For Samantha Johnson . . . always.

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One

‘Ironic how the only certainty in life is death, don’t you think?’ The man’s voice was calm. His posture relaxed.

‘Please . . . you don’t have to do this.’ In contrast, the man on the floor was petrified and exhausted. His voice strangled by tears and blood. He was naked and shivering. His arms were stretched above his head, chained by his wrists to the raw brick wall.

The dark basement room had been transformed into a medieval-looking dungeon, all four walls fitted with heavy metal shackles. A sickening smell of urine lingered in the air and an incessant buzzing sound came from a large wooden box in the corner, placed there by the attacker. The room was sound- and escape-proof. Once locked inside, there was no way of getting out unless someone let you out.

‘It doesn’t matter how you’ve lived your life,’ the other man continued, disregarding the bleeding man. ‘It doesn’t matter how rich you are, what you’ve accomplished, who you know or what hopes you have. In the end the same thing will happen to all of us – we’ll all die.’

‘Please, God, no.’

‘What matters is how we die.’

The man on the floor coughed, spitting out a thin red mist of blood.

‘Some people die naturally, painlessly, as they reach the end of a natural cycle.’ The man laughed a bizarre, gurgling laugh. ‘Some people suffer for years with incurable diseases, fighting every minute to add just a few more seconds to their lives.’

‘I . . . I’m not rich. I don’t have much, but whatever I have you can take.’

‘Shhhh.’ The man brought a finger to his lips before whispering, ‘I don’t need your money.’

Another cough. Another mist of blood.

An evil smile parted the assailant’s lips. ‘Some people die very slowly,’ he continued. His voice was cold. ‘The pain of death can drag on for hours . . . days . . . weeks . . . If you know what you’re doing, there’s no limit, did you know that?’ He paused.

Until then, the chained man hadn’t noticed the nail gun in his attacker’s hand.

‘And I really do know what I’m doing. Allow me to demonstrate.’ He stepped on the bone protruding from the victim’s fractured ankle, bent over and quickly fired three nails into the man’s right knee. Intense pain shot up the victim’s leg and sucked the air out of his lungs, blurring his vision for several seconds. The nails were only three inches long. Not long enough to puncture through to the other side, but sharp enough to shatter bone, cartilage and ligaments.

The chained man took quick, shallow breaths. He tried to speak through the pain. ‘Plea . . . please. I have a daughter. She’s ill. She suffers from a rare condition and I’m everything she’s got.’

The strange gurgling laugh filled the room again. ‘You think I care? Let me show you how much I care.’ He grabbed the head of one of the nails lodged into the man’s knee and, as if using a screwdriver to pop open a can of paint, slowly forced it

to one side as far as it would go. The crunching noise was like stepping on broken glass.

The victim roared as he felt the grinding of metal against bone. His attacker applied just enough force to overcome the resistance and splinter the kneecap. Shards of bone perforated nerve and muscle. Nausea flooded through the chained man's body. His assailant slapped his face several times to keep him from passing out.

'Stay with me,' he whispered. 'I want you to enjoy every moment of this. There's more to come.'

'Why . . . Why are you doing this?'

'Why?' The man licked his cracked lips and smiled. 'I'll show you why.' From his pocket he produced a photograph and held it inches away from the chained man's face.

The man's eyes rested in confusion on the picture for several seconds. 'I don't understand. What . . .?' He froze as he finally realized what he was looking at. 'Oh my God!'

His tormentor moved closer, his lips almost touching the bleeding man's right ear.

'Guess what,' he whispered as he glanced at the wooden box in the corner, 'I know what scares you to death.'

Two

Christmas was ten days away and Los Angeles was embracing the festive spirit. Streets and shop windows everywhere were decorated with colorful lights, Santa Clauses and fake snow. At 5:30 a.m. the drive through south Los Angeles felt eerily calm.

The white front of the small church glowed against the tall, naked California walnut trees on either side of the arched wooden doorway. Picture-postcard scenery. Except for the police officers swarming around the building and the yellow crime-scene tape that kept curious onlookers at a safe distance.

Dark clouds had started to gather as Robert Hunter stepped out of the car, stretched his body and blew onto his hands before zipping up his leather jacket. Bracing himself against the strengthening cold Pacific wind and studying the sky, Hunter knew that rain was no more than a few minutes away.

The Homicide Special Section (HSS) of the LAPD Robbery-Homicide Division is a specialized branch. It deals with serial killers and high-profile homicide cases requiring extensive time and expertise. Hunter was its most accomplished detective. His young partner, Carlos Garcia, had worked hard to make detective, and he'd done it faster than most. First assigned to the LAPD Central Bureau, he'd spent a few years busting gang members, armed robbers and drug pushers in northeast LA before he was offered a position with the HSS.

As Hunter clipped his badge onto his belt, he spotted Garcia talking to a young officer. Despite the early hour, Garcia looked bright and alert. His longish, dark brown hair was still damp from his morning shower.

‘Weren’t we supposed to have today off?’ Garcia said under his breath as Hunter approached them. ‘I made plans.’

Hunter nodded a silent ‘good morning’ at the officer, who returned the gesture. ‘We’re Homicide Special, Carlos.’ He tucked his hands into his jacket pockets. ‘Words like “day off, pay rise, holiday and vacation” don’t apply to us. You should know that by now.’

‘I’m learning fast.’

‘You been inside yet?’ Hunter asked as his pale blue eyes focused on the church.

‘I just got here.’

Hunter faced the young officer. ‘You?’

Six foot two and well built, he ran a hand through his short-cropped black hair nervously under Hunter’s attentive eye. ‘I haven’t been inside either, sir, but apparently it isn’t a pretty sight. See those two over there?’ He pointed to two pale-faced police officers standing to the left of the church. ‘They were first response. I heard it took ‘em less than twenty seconds to come running out puking their guts all over the place.’ He mechanically checked his watch. ‘I got here five minutes after they did.’

Hunter massaged the back of his neck, feeling the rough, lumpy scar on his nape. His eyes scanned the crowd already gathered behind the yellow tape. ‘Do you have a camera with you?’ he asked the officer, who shook his head, frowning.

‘How about a phone cam?’

‘Yeah, my personal cell phone’s gotta cam. Why?’

‘I want you to take a few pictures of the crowd for me.’

‘The crowd?’ the officer asked, confused.

‘Yeah, but do it discreetly. Pretend you’re taking crime-scene pictures of the outside of the church or something. Try to get the whole crowd. And from different angles. You think you can do that?’

‘Yeah, but . . .’

‘Trust me,’ Hunter said calmly. ‘I’ll explain later.’

The officer nodded eagerly before reaching inside the police vehicle for his cell phone.

Three

‘The vultures are already here,’ Garcia observed as they approached the yellow tape. Behind them, reporters were pushing their way to the front of the crowd, their camera flashes exploding every few seconds. ‘I think they get the call before we do.’

‘They do,’ Hunter confirmed, ‘and they pay very well for the information too.’

The policeman standing behind the tape nodded as Hunter and Garcia stooped under.

‘Detective Hunter,’ a short, round and bald reporter called out. ‘Do you think this is a religious kill?’

Hunter turned to face the squad of reporters. He understood their apprehension. Inside that small church someone had been robbed of his or her life, and they all knew that if Robert Hunter had been assigned to the case, the murderer had used overwhelming violence to do it.

‘We just got here, Tom,’ Hunter answered evenly. ‘We haven’t even been inside yet. At this point you probably know more than we do.’

‘Could this be the work of a serial killer?’ A tall, attractive brunette asked. She was wearing a thick winter coat and holding a small tape recorder. Hunter had never seen her before.

‘Did I stutter?’ he murmured, looking at Garcia. ‘I’m gonna

say it slower this time for those of you who have trouble keeping up.’ He stared straight at the brunette. ‘We-just-got-here. We-haven’t-been-inside-yet. And you guys know the drill. If you want any information, you’ll have to wait for the official police press conference. If there *is* one.’

The brunette met Hunter’s stare before disappearing towards the back of the crowd.

A crime-lab agent waited on the worn stone steps of the church’s entrance, ready to hand Hunter and Garcia white Tyvek coveralls.

As they stepped inside, they were hit by the smell. A combination of perspiration, old wood and the sharp, metallic odor of blood.

Two long rows of red oak pews were separated by a narrow aisle that ran from the entrance to the steps at the altar. On a busy day, the Seven Saints Catholic Church could receive close to two hundred worshippers.

Its small interior was brightly lit by two large forensic powerlights mounted on separate metal pedestals. In their unnatural brilliance everything was harsh and clinical. At the end of the aisle three crime-lab agents were photographing and dusting every inch of the altar and the confessional on the right-hand side.

The door closed behind them. Hunter felt the anxiety that came with the first steps into every new murder scene.

Hearing their approach, the crime-lab agents paused and looked up uneasily. The two detectives walked towards them, stopping at the altar steps.

Blood was everywhere.

‘Jesus Christ!’ Garcia murmured, covering his mouth and nose with both hands. ‘What the hell is that?’

Four

Winter in the City of Angels is mild compared with most of the USA. Temperatures rarely go below fifty degrees Fahrenheit, but for Los Angeles residents that's certainly cold enough. By 5:45 a.m. a cold drizzle had started. Police officer Ian Hopkins wiped his cell phone on the sleeve of his uniform jacket before snapping another picture of the observers outside the church.

'What the hell are you doing?' asked Justin Norton, one of the two officers first at the scene.

'Taking pictures,' Hopkins replied facetiously.

'Why? Do you have a morbid fetish for crime scenes or something?'

'Homicide Special asked me to do it.'

Officer Norton looked at Hopkins sarcastically. 'Well, I'm not sure if you've noticed, but the crime scene is that way.' He used his thumb over his shoulder to point to the church behind him.

'The detective doesn't want pictures of the church. He wants pictures of the crowd.'

A worried frown this time. 'Did he tell you why?'

Hopkins shook his head.

'And why are you holding the camera around chest height instead of bringing it to your eye?'

‘He doesn’t want the crowd to know I’m taking pictures of them. I’m just trying to be discreet.’

‘These Homicide Special detectives . . .’ Norton tapped his left index finger against the side of his head. ‘They’re really fucked up in the head, d’you know what I mean?’

Hopkins shrugged the comment away. ‘I think I’ve got enough now anyway. Plus this rain will screw up my phone if I’m not careful. Hey . . .’ he called as Norton started to walk away. ‘What happened in there?’

Norton turned around slowly and locked eyes with Hopkins. ‘You’re new to the force, right?’

‘It’ll be three months this week.’

Norton gave him a cheesy smile. ‘Well, I’ve been a cop for over seven years,’ he said calmly, pulling his cap lower over his eyes. ‘Believe me, this city has thrown some messed-up shit my way, but nothing like what’s in there. There are some evil people in this city. For your sake, just take your pictures and move onto the next job. You don’t want the image of what’s in there burned into your memory right at the beginning of your career. Trust me.’

Five

Hunter stood perfectly still. His eyes absorbing the scene as the adrenalin flooded his senses. On the stone floor just outside the confessional, surrounded by a pool of blood, the decapitated body of a slim and average-height man dressed in a priest's cassock lay on its back. It'd been purposely positioned. Its legs were stretched out. Its arms crossed over its chest. But Hunter's main focus was on the head.

A dog's head.

It'd been attached to a wooden spike and then rammed down the neck's stump, making the body on the floor look like a grotesque, human/dog mutation.

The dog's lips were dark purple. Its thin, long tongue had stained black with blood and was hanging to the left of its deformed mouth. The eyes were wide open and a dull milky white. Its short fur was caked a dark red. Hunter took a step forward and crouched down next to the body. He wasn't an expert in dog breeding, but he could tell that the head used was that of a street mutt.

'A shocking sight, isn't it?' Mike Brindle, the lead forensic agent at the scene asked as he approached both detectives.

Hunter stood up to face him. Garcia kept his eyes on the body.

'Hi, Mike,' Hunter replied.

Brindle was in his late forties, stick thin and doorframe tall. Certainly one of the best forensic agents Los Angeles had to offer.

‘How’s the insomnia going?’ Brindle asked.

‘Same as always,’ Hunter answered with a shrug.

Hunter’s chronic insomnia was no secret. It’d started mildly after his mother’s death when he was seven. As the years went by it intensified. Hunter knew it was nothing more than his brain’s defense mechanism so he didn’t have to deal with the ghastly nightmares. Instead of fighting it, he simply learned to live with it. He could survive on three, if needed two, hours of sleep a night.

‘What do we have?’ Hunter asked in a calm voice.

‘We just started. We got here fifteen minutes ago, so at the moment I know just about as much as you do, with one exception.’ Brindle pointed to the body. ‘It looks like that used to be Father Fabian.’

‘Looks like?’ Hunter instinctively allowed his eyes to search the area. ‘You haven’t found the head yet?’

‘Not yet,’ Brindle answered, casting a questioning look towards the two other crime-lab agents, who shook their heads.

‘Who found the body?’

‘The altar boy, Hermano something. When he came into the church this morning he was greeted with what you see here.’

‘Where’s he?’

‘In the back,’ Brindle answered with a head tilt. ‘There’s an officer with him, but not surprisingly he’s in a bit of a shock.’

‘Approximate time of death?’

‘Rigor mortis is well on its way. I’d say somewhere around eight to twelve hours ago. Definitely sometime last night. Not this morning.’

Hunter kneeled down and studied the body for a while longer. ‘No defensive wounds?’

‘Nope.’ Brindle shook his head. ‘It looks like the victim has no other wounds of any nature. He was killed quickly.’

Hunter switched his attention to the trail of blood that started at the body and moved up the steps leading to the altar.

‘It doesn’t get any better once you get up there,’ Brindle commented as he followed Hunter’s stare. ‘In fact, I’d say it gets more complicated for you guys.’

Six

Garcia tore his eyes away from the body and faced the forensic agent. ‘What do you mean?’

Brindle scratched his nose and faced him. ‘Well, you’re the ones who’ll have to figure out what all this means. The pattern of blood splatters up there—’ he shook his head, considering ‘—it doesn’t seem random.’

‘Human blood?’ Hunter asked.

‘As opposed to dog’s blood?’ Brindle countered, pointing to the dog’s head.

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Can’t say for certain yet. Very hard to tell just by looking at it. Their properties are very similar.’

Hunter climbed up the altar steps in one smooth movement. Garcia and Brindle followed. The place was covered in blood, but Brindle was right – there was definitely a pattern. Some sort of symmetry. On the floor, a thin continuous crimson trail created a circle all around the altar. On the wall directly behind it, there was a long, uneven diagonal splash, as if someone had dipped a paintbrush in the blood and flicked it against the wall. Hundreds of smaller splatters littered the once-crisp white altar cloth.

‘Usually when the distribution of blood covers such a large area, it’s due to one of two types of struggle,’ Brindle explained.

‘A fight, where both parties involved run around punching each other and bleeding all over the place, or an injured victim struggling to get away from his attacker.’

‘The splatters aren’t consistent with a fight scenario or a runaway struggle,’ Hunter said, analyzing the pattern. ‘The distance between them – the shapes – it’s all too symmetric, almost calculated. This blood trail was intentionally created by the killer, not the victim,’ he added calmly.

‘I agree,’ Brindle said, folding his arms over his chest. ‘This wasn’t a fight, and Father Fabian didn’t get a chance to run away from anything.’

‘What gets me is, if the priest was killed down there—’ Garcia pointed to the body ‘—how did all this blood get up here?’

Brindle shrugged.

Hunter approached the altar and carefully walked around it, studying the thin blood trail on the floor. He stopped when he’d completed a full circle.

‘How tall are you, Mike?’

‘Six-four, why?’

‘How about you, Carlos?’

‘Six-two.’

‘Come here.’ Hunter motioned Garcia closer. ‘Walk with me slowly,’ he said as his partner joined him. ‘Stay about a foot away from the trail. Take one step at a time and walk naturally. Start from right here.’ He indicated a point on the floor directly behind the center of the altar.

The two other crime-lab agents stopped what they were doing and joined Mike Brindle by one of the powerlights.

Garcia had taken only four steps when Hunter asked him to stop. Bending over, he quickly checked Garcia’s foot position in relation to the trail before allowing him to continue. Four steps

later, Hunter stopped Garcia once again. Four steps after that, the circle was completed.

‘Twelve steps in total,’ Garcia said with an intrigued look.

Hunter called Brindle over and asked him to do exactly the same as Garcia had just done.

‘Eleven steps from me,’ Brindle said when he reached his starting point after a full circle.

‘I’d say the killer’s Garcia’s height,’ Hunter concluded. ‘Six-two, give or take half an inch.’