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New Orleans
2005

MONDAY, 4:28 A.M., the narrow French Quarter room was smoky with cheap candles that smelled of honey. Daniel stared through broken shutters and shivering glass up the length of the alley, catching a thin slice of Jackson Square through curtains of gale-force rain that swirled through New Orleans like mad bats riding the storm. Daniel had never seen rain fall up before.

Daniel loved these damned hurricanes. He folded back the shutters, then opened the window. Rain hit him good. It tasted of salt and smelled of dead fish and weeds. The cat-five wind clawed through New Orleans at better than a hundred miles an hour, but back here in the alley—in a cheap one-room apartment over a po'boy shop—the wind was no stronger than an arrogant breeze.

The power in this part of the Quarter had gone out almost an hour ago; hence, the candles Daniel found in the manager's office. Emergency lighting fed by battery packs lit a few nearby buildings, giving a

creepy blue glow to the shimmering walls. Most everyone in the surrounding buildings had gone. Not everyone, but most. The stubborn, the helpless, and the stupid had stayed.

Like Daniel's friend, Tolley.

Tolley had stayed.

Stupid.

And now here they were in an empty building surrounded by empty buildings in an outrageous storm that had forced more than a million people out of the city, but Daniel kinda dug it. All this noise and all this emptiness, no one to hear Tolley scream.

Daniel turned from the window, arching his eyebrows.

"You smell that? That's what zombies smell like, brought up from the dead with an unnatural life. You get to see a zombie?"

Tolley was between answers right now, being tied to the bed with thirty feet of nylon cord. His head just kinda hung there, all swollen and broken, though he was still breathing. Every once in a while he would lurch and shiver. Daniel didn't let Tolley's lack of responsiveness stop him.

Daniel sauntered over to the bed. Cleo and Tobey shuffled out of the way, letting him pass.

Daniel had a syringe pack in his bag, along with some poppers, meth, and other choice pharmaceuticals. He took out the kit, shot up Tolley with some crystal, then waited for it to take effect. Outside, something exploded with a muffled *whump* that wasn't quite lost in the wind. Power

transformer, probably, giving up the ghost, or maybe a wall falling over.

Tolley's eyes flickered amid a sudden fury of blinks, then dialed into focus. He tried to pull away when he saw Daniel, but, really, where could he go?

Daniel said, all serious, "I asked you, you seen a zombie? They got'm here in this place, I know for a fact."

Tolley shook his head, which kinda pissed Daniel off. On his way to New Orleans six days earlier, having been sent to find Tolley based upon an absolutely spot-on lead, Daniel decided this was his one pure and good chance to see a zombie. Daniel could not abide a zombie, and found their existence offensive. The dead should stay dead, and not rise to walk again, all shamblin' and vile and slack. He didn't care for vampires, either, but zombies just rubbed him the wrong way. Daniel had it on good authority that New Orleans held quite a few zombies, and maybe a vampire or two.

"Don't be like that, Tolliver. New Orleans is supposed to have zombies, don't it, what with all this hoodoo and shit you got here, them zombies from Haiti? You musta seen something?"

Tolley's eyes were bright with meth, the one eye, the left, a glossy red ball what with the burst veins.

Daniel wiped the rain from his face, and felt all tired.

"Where is she?"

"I swear I doan know."

"You kill her? That what you been tryin' to say?"

“No!”

“She tell you where they goin’?”

“I don’t know nuthin’ about—”

Daniel hammered his fist straight down on Tolley’s chest, and scooped up the Asp. The Asp was a collapsible steel rod almost two feet long. Daniel brought it down hard, lashing Tolley’s chest, belly, thighs, and shins with a furious beating. Tolley screamed and jerked at his binds, but no one was left to hear. Daniel let him have it for a long time, then tossed aside the Asp and returned to the window. Tobey and Cleo scrambled out of his way.

“I wanna see a goddamned zombie. A zombie, vampire, *something* to make this fuckin’ trip worthwhile.”

The rain blew in hard, hot and salty as blood. Daniel didn’t care. Here he was, come all this way, and not a zombie to be found. Anything was good, Daniel missed out. A life of miserable disappointments.

He looked at Tobey and Cleo. They were difficult to see in the flickery light, all blurry and smudged, but he could make them out well enough.

“Bet I could kill me a zombie, one on one, straight up, and I’d like to try. You think I could kill me a zombie?”

Neither Tobey nor Cleo answered.

“I ain’t shittin’, I could take me a zombie. Take me a vampire, too, only here we are and I gotta waste my time with this lame shit. I’d rather be huntin’ zombies.”

He pointed at Tolley.

"Hey, boy."

Daniel returned to the bed and shook Tolley awake.

"You think I could take me a zombie, head up, one on one?"

The red eye rolled, and blood leaked from the shattered mouth. A mushy hiss escaped, so Daniel leaned closer. Sounded like the fucker was finally openin' up.

"Say what?"

Tolley's mouth worked as he tried to speak.

Daniel smiled encouragingly.

"You hear that wind? I was a bat, I'd spread my wings and ride that sumbitch for all she was worth. Where'd they go, boy? I know she tol' ya. You tell me where they went so I can get outta here. Just say it. You're almost there. Give me a hand, and I'm out your hair."

Tolley's lips worked, and Daniel knew he was about to give it, but then what little air he had left hissed out.

"You say west? They was headed west? Over to Texas?"

Tolley was dead.

Daniel stared at the body for a moment, then drew his gun and put five bullets into Tolliver James's chest. Nasty explosions that anyone staying behind would have heard even with the lion wind. Daniel didn't give a damn. If someone came running, Daniel figured to shoot them, too, but nobody came—no police, no neighbors, no nobody. Everyone with

two squirts of brain juice was hunkered down tight, trying to survive.

Daniel reloaded, tucked away his gun, then took out the satellite phone. The cell stations were out all over the city, but the sat phone worked great. He checked the time, hit the speed dial, then waited for a link. It always took a few seconds.

In that time, he stood taller, straightened himself, and resumed his normal manner.

When the connection was made, Daniel reported.

"Tolliver James is dead. He didn't provide anything useful."

Daniel listened for a moment before responding.

"No, sir, they're gone. That much is confirmed. James was a good bet, but I don't believe she told him anything."

He listened again, this time for quite a while.

"No, sir, that is not altogether true. There are three or four people here I'd still like to talk to, but the storm has turned this place to shit. They've almost certainly evacuated. I just don't know. It will take me a while to locate them."

More chatter from the other side, but then they were finished.

"Yes, sir, I understand. You get yours, I get mine. I won't let you down."

A last word from the master.

"Yes, sir. Thank you. I'll keep you informed."

Daniel shut the phone and put it away.

"Asshole."

He returned to the window, and let the rain lash

him. Everything was wet now: shirt, pants, shoes, hair, all the way down to his bones. He leaned out, better to see the Square. A fifty-five-gallon oil drum tumbled past the alley's mouth, end over end, followed by a bicycle, swept along on its side, and then a shattered sheet of plywood flipping and soaring like a playing card tossed out like trash.

Daniel shouted into the wind as loud as he could.

"C'mon and get me, you fuckin' zombies! Show your true and unnatural colors."

Daniel threw back his head and howled. He barked like a dog, then howled again before turning back to the room to pack up his gear. Tobey and Cleo were gone.

Tolliver had hidden eight thousand dollars under the mattress, still vacu-packed in plastic, which Daniel found when he first searched the room. Probably a gift from the girl. Daniel stashed the money in his bag, checked to make sure Tolliver had no pulse, then went to the little bathroom where he'd left Tolliver's lady friend after he strangled her, nice and neat in the tub. A little black stream of ants had already found her, not even a day.

Cleo said, "Gotta get going, Daniel. Stop fuckin' around."

Tobey said, "Go where, a storm like this? Makes sense to stay."

Daniel decided Tobey was right. Tobey was the smart one, and usually right, even if Daniel couldn't always see him.

"Okay, I guess I should wait till the worst is over."

Tobey said, "Wait."

Cleo said, "Wait, wait."

Like echoes fading away.

Daniel returned to the window. He leaned out into the rain again, watching the mouth of the alley in case a zombie rattled past.

"C'mon, goddamnit, lemme see one. One freaky-ass zombie is all I ask."

If a zombie appeared, Daniel planned to jump out the window after it and rip its putrid, unnatural flesh to pieces with his teeth. He was, after all, a werewolf, which was why he was such a good hunter and killer. Werewolves feared nothing.

Daniel tipped back his head and howled to match the wind, then doused the candles and sat with the bodies, waiting for the storm to pass.

When it ended, Daniel would find their trail, and track them, and he would not quit until they were his. No matter how long it took or how far they ran. This was why the men down south used him for these jobs and paid him so well.

Werewolves caught their prey.

Los Angeles
Now

SIX MINUTES BEFORE HE SAW the two men, Joe Pike stopped at a Mobil station for air. Pike sensed they were going to commit a crime the moment he saw them. Venice, California, ten thirty-five that morning, warm sunny day, not far from the sea. He had checked his tire pressure before heading to the gym, and found the right front tire three pounds low. If he had not needed air, he would not have seen the two men and gotten involved, but the tire was low. He stopped for the air.

Pike added the three pounds, then topped off his gas. While the pump ran, he inspected his red Jeep Cherokee for dings, scratches, and road tar, then checked the fluid levels.

Brake fluid—good.

Power steering—good.

Transmission—good.

Coolant—good.

The Jeep, though not a new vehicle, was spotless. Pike maintained it meticulously. Taking care of

himself and his gear had been impressed upon a then-seventeen-year-old Pike by men he respected when he was a young Marine, and the lesson had served him well in his various occupations.

As Pike closed the hood, three women biked past on the opposite side of the street, fine legs churning, sleek backs arched over handlebars. Pike watched them pass, the women bringing his eye to two men walking in the opposite direction—*blink*—and Pike read them for trouble, two men in their twenties, necklaced with gang ink, walking with what Pike during his police officer days had called a down-low walk. Bangers were common in Venice, but these two weren't relaxed like a couple of homies with nothing on their minds; they rolled with a stony, side-to-side swagger showing they were tensed up and tight, the one nearest the curb glancing into parked cars, which, Pike knew, suggested they were looking for something to steal.

Pike had spent three years as an LAPD patrol officer, where he learned how to read people pretty well. Then he had changed jobs, and worked in high-conflict, dangerous environments all over the world where he learned to read the subtle clues of body language and expression even better. His life had depended on it.

Now, Pike felt a tug of curiosity. If they had kept walking, Pike would have let it go, but they stopped outside a secondhand women's clothing shop directly across the street. Pike was no longer a police officer. He did not cruise the streets looking for criminals

and had other things to do, but everything about their posture and expressions triggered a dull red warning vibe. The women's shop was an ideal place from which to snatch a purse.

Pike finished filling his tank, but did not get into his vehicle. A BMW pulled into the Mobil station behind Pike's Jeep. The driver waited for a moment, then beeped her horn and called from her car.

"Are you going to move?"

Pike concentrated on the two men, squinting against the bright morning light even behind his dark glasses.

She tapped her horn again.

"Are you going to move or what? I need some gas."

Pike stayed with the men.

"Jerk."

She backed up and moved to another pump.

Pike watched the two men have a brief conversation, then continue past the clothing store to a sandwich shop. A hand-painted sign on the front window read: *Wilson's TakeOut—po'boys & sandwiches.*

The two men started to enter, but immediately backed away. A middle-aged woman carrying a white bag and a large purse came out. When she emerged, one of the men quickly turned to the street and the other brought his hand to his eyes, clearly trying to hide. The tell was so obvious the corner of Pike's mouth twitched, which was as close to a smile as Pike ever came.

When the woman was gone, the two men entered the sandwich shop.

Pike knew they were likely two guys looking to surprise a friend or buy a couple of sandwiches, but he wanted to see how it played out.

Pike crossed the street between passing cars. The sandwich shop was small, with two tiny tables up front by the window and a short counter in the rear where you ordered your food. A chalkboard menu and a New Orleans Saints Super Bowl Champions poster were on the walls behind the counter, along with a door that probably led to a storage room or pantry.

The events unfolding inside the takeout shop had happened quickly. When Pike reached the door, the two men had an older man on the floor, one punching the man's head, the other kicking his back. The man had rolled into a ball, trying to protect himself.

The two hitters hesitated when Pike opened the door, both of them sucking air like surfacing whales. Pike saw their hands were empty, though someone else might have been behind the counter or in the back room. Then the guy throwing punches went back to pounding, and the kicker turned toward Pike, his face mottled and threatening. Pike thought of nature films he'd seen with silverback gorillas puffing themselves to look fierce.

"You wan' this, bitch? Get outta here."

Pike didn't get out. He stepped inside and closed the door.

Pike saw a flick of surprise in the kicker's eyes, and the puncher hesitated again. They had expected him to run, one man against two, but Pike did not run.

The victim—the man on the floor—still curled into a ball, mumbled—

“I’m okay. Jesus—”

—even as the kicker puffed himself larger. He raised his fists and stomped toward Pike, a street brawler high on his own violence, trying to frighten Pike away.

Pike moved forward fast, and the surprised kicker pulled up short, caught off guard by Pike’s advance. Then Pike dropped low and accelerated, as smoothly as water flows over rocks. He trapped the man’s arm, rolled it backward, and brought the man down hard, snapping the radius bone and dislocating the ulna. He hit the man one time in the Adam’s apple with the edge of his hand, the water now swirling off rocks as he rose to face the puncher, only the puncher had seen enough. He scrambled backward across the counter, and bounced off the wall as he ran out a back door.

The kicker gakked like a cat with a hair ball as he tried to breathe and scream at the same time. Pike dropped to a knee, watching the back door as he checked the man for a weapon. He found a nine-millimeter pistol, then left the downed man long enough to make sure no one was behind the counter or in the back room. He returned to the kicker, rolled him onto his belly, then stripped the man’s belt to bind his wrists. The man shrieked when Pike twisted the injured arm behind his back, and tried to get up, but Pike racked his face into the floor.

Pike said, “Stop.”

Pike had neutralized the assailant and secured the premises in less than six seconds.

The older man tried to sit up as Pike worked.

Pike said, "You good?"

"It's okay. I'm fine."

He didn't look fine. Blood veiled his face and splattered the floor. The man saw the red spots, touched his face, then examined the red on his fingers.

"Shit. I'm bleeding."

The man rose to a knee, but tipped sideways and ended up on his butt.

Pike took out his phone and thumbed in 911.

"Stay down. I'm getting the paramedics."

The man squinted at Pike, and Pike could tell he had trouble focusing.

"You a cop?"

"No."

"I don't need the paramedics. Catch my breath, I'll be fine."

The kicker twisted his head to see Pike.

"You ain't a cop, an' you broke my arm? You bitch, you better lemme up."

Pike pinned him with a knee, making the kicker gasp.

When the 911 operator came on the line, Pike described the situation and the victim's injury, told her he had a suspect in hand, and asked her to send the police.

The man made a feeble attempt to rise again.

"Fuck all that. Just throw the asshole out."

Pike had seen pretty much every violent injury

that could happen to a human being, so he knew wounds pretty well. Scalp wounds produced a lot of blood and weren't generally serious, but it had taken a hard blow to split the man's forehead.

"Stay down. You have a concussion."

"Fuck that. I'm fine."

The man pulled his legs under himself, pushed to his feet, then passed out and fell.

Pike wanted to go to him, but the kicker was bunching to rise.

"Better get off me, *ese*. You gonna be sorry."

Pike dug his thumb into the side of the man's neck where the C3 nerve root emerged from the third vertebra, crushing the root into the bone. This caused the man's shoulder and chest to go numb with a sharp flash of pain. His diaphragm locked and his breathing stopped mid-breath. The C3 nerve controlled the diaphragm.

"If you get up, I'll do this again. It will hurt worse."

Pike released the pressure, and knew the man's shoulder and arm now burned as if they had been flushed with napalm.

"We good?"

The man gave a breathless grunt, eyes rolling toward Pike like a Chihuahua watching a pit bull.

"Yuh."

Pike straightened the victim so he could breathe more easily, then checked his pulse. His pulse was strong, but his pupils were different sizes, which indicated a concussion. Pike pressed a wad of napkins to the man's wound to stop the bleeding.

The kicker said, "Who the fuck are you, man?"

"Don't speak again."

If Pike had not stopped for air, he would not have seen the men or crossed the street. He would not have met the woman he was about to meet. Nothing that was about to happen would have happened. But Pike had stopped. And now the worst was coming.

The paramedics arrived six minutes later.