

OUTSOURCED

an

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thriller

The gavel impacted with imperative finality. The buzz in the courtroom continued; only those in the seating closest to the judge heeding her warning. Two more detonations of wood against wood followed in quick succession. This time a reluctant silence enveloped the room.

“I know this has been a tiring trial; it’s been a long trial for all of us.” She paused, glancing at the defense counsel to her right, then at the jury on the opposite side of the room. “I WILL have order in my court. Leave your outbursts, comments and protestations for the appropriate channels.”

Now she was looking squarely at the Prosecutor’s table. Its occupants stared back defiantly. Neither was happy at the verdict; both, however, realized the fault was their own. The case, at best, had been circumstantial, but, they were talking premeditated mass murder here. The man and woman looked at each other; they felt cheated.

The judge banged her gavel once more, unnecessarily, in the quiet that saturated the stuffy air in the packed room.

She twisted in her chair, facing the accused again.

“As I was saying...” another furtive peek at the District Attorney’s people, “Robert Polanski, you have been acquitted of multiple charges of murder by a jury of your peers and I hereby instruct...”

* * * * *

Polanski walked alongside his legal representative, his head on a swivel. They had exited the courthouse by the rear doors, hoping to avoid the expectant questions of the media. Polanski had been through two trials in the last few months; the legal one, fought in the halls of the large building behind them and bound by laws and procedures, and the popular one, disputed in the Press, on TV and on the Internet where no such constraints applied. Legally he had been found not guilty; in the Public Eye, he was as guilty as Hell! And he was; in the dark corners of his mind he was well aware of how he had escaped from what should have been a stay on Death Row prior to a well-deserved execution as retribution for the acts he had committed.

He turned to the chubby figure at his side.

“Did you bring that package I had delivered to you last week?” His tone was neutral; there was nothing between the lawyer and his defendant other than a strictly professional relationship upheld by force of cash.

The lawyer nodded, then raised a large, floral handkerchief to mop his brow.

“Let’s grab a coffee and...”

“No. We are going back to my office. You have some papers to sign and I’ll give you the package there. After that, I don’t want to see or hear from you ever again. Am I clear on that, Polanski?”

The shorter man looked over at the speaker. It was more than evident curtailing their connection as quickly as possible was uppermost in the lawyer’s mind.

“If you hate me so much, why didn’t you recuse yourself?”

“You know damned well why. But I’ve done my job now and don’t have to spend another day in your company.”

“Three million dollars doesn’t buy much loyalty these days, eh?”

“You’re free, although you shouldn’t be, as we both know, so it bought you that.”

The lawyer paused.

“I know I’m going to regret this, but, just how did you kill all those people?”

“Still Client-Attorney privilege?”

“One of the most abused concepts in American law, but yes; nothing you tell me goes any further.”

“I just manipulated their futures. It was all about the planning...”

“You manipulated the futures of 217 people?”

“Yes; over the last twenty-three years.” Polanski halted his steps, turning to face the lawyer. “And just remember, I got away with that, so don’t get any ideas about talking out of turn.”

“I have no wish to become your victim number 218...”

“Oh, the real number’s a little higher. Those were just the cases the DA thought they could prove. The total’s nearer to four hundred.”

The lawyer elected not to answer, glancing at his wristwatch and mentally counting the minutes he still needed to share with this client.

The man with the deep sunburnt face in the third row of seats stood and ambled out of the courtroom along with the rest of the packed crowd. As he crossed the vast steel and glass atrium, he scanned ahead and spotted the huge knot of TV and Press people expectantly watching the main doors, undoubtedly seeking a juicy comment or two from Polanski or his lawyer.

He made a rapid decision and turned toward one of the armed security guards near the x-ray machine on his right. Held low so as not to be seen by unwanted eyes, he flashed his badge and spoke quietly. The man nodded and pointed to a doorway behind him, nestling under a red-lettered 'Authorized Personnel Only' sign. The agent thanked the security guard and stepped past, pushing open the heavy steel door. Ahead, an empty, cool passageway stretched toward the back of the building. His footfalls echoed off the hardwood floor as his brisk steps carried him by several darkened office spaces and finally to another heavy metal door adorned with a panic-bar. He assumed the exit was alarmed and looked up to see the camera's eye tracking his progress. He raised his ID badge again, holding it for an instant so the watchers could clearly see its authority, then he put his weight against the bar and pushed.

Glaring daylight assaulted his eyes as he stepped through. Squinting, he scanned the area, gaining his bearings, as he waited for the return spring to close the door at his back. To his right was the court employee parking area, with a section reserved for the 'school' bus, except here it was a slightly more modern affair; more a Greyhound long-distance coach than the typical salvaged children carrier now fitted with less child-friendly armor. Just below the tinted windows that ran its length the words 'Arizona Department of Corrections' was stenciled in white against a blue background. To their left was a solid outline of the state, also in white, sited just behind where the driver would sit. Currently that seat was empty. Nearby he spotted a couple of uniformed DOC officials, cowering from the midday heat in the deep shadow afforded by a short cement overhang above another door. Both were smoking and looking nervously at their watches. He knew Polanski would not be using that transport again, not after the verdict he had just heard.

He looked over to his right, toward the front corner of the building, pondering what Polanski would do when he departed the courthouse. The agent had little time to come to a decision as the door behind him opened; his person of interest, and his mouthpiece, exited quickly. They had been talking, but both rapidly silenced their words on seeing him standing there in the bright sunlight. As they walked quickly past, the agent reached into his jacket and withdrew a pair of shades, his eyes gratefully acknowledging their protection as he walked toward his hire car.

He squirmed on the burning faux-leather seat as he fired up the engine and flipped the air-conditioning into overdrive. All the time his eyes never left the two men boarding the lawyer's luxury sedan some fifty feet away. He reached into his inside pocket, extracting his cellphone. It took a few seconds to boot up, time spent watching as the lawyer cracked the window of his vehicle to let out some of the heat trapped within. They were too far away for him to hear but he assumed the attorney's first actions had mirrored his own. Polanski just sat in the front passenger seat, waiting, smiling.

The call was answered on the first ring.

"Verdict as expected. They've left the courthouse together in the lawyer's car. Any change in orders?"

He listened to the brief reply then rung off without speaking again.

The high-gloss, black hood of the luxury sedan nosed by his car as it sped toward the exit.

'Who the hell chooses a black paint job in this heat?' he thought as he selected drive and followed.

Polanski pulled out the chair and flopped into its hard contours. At least it was cool in the coffee shop; the air con was winning the battle against the relentless rays. He had ordered as he entered; a double slice of apple pie with all the trimmings and a large black coffee, Tanzanian Peaberry, the most expensive on the menu. On his first day of freedom after two years, those simple pleasures were all he needed.

While he waited for his food to arrive, Polanski extracted from his jacket pockets the items he had brought from his lawyer's office. He placed the padded envelope to one side, glancing at the address handwritten in thick, black ink. A thought crept into his mind and he flipped the envelope to ensure no return address sticker had been added. Good; when sent, this would be a one-way trip for the contents.

Next, a single sheet of white paper taken from the feed drawer of his lawyer's inkjet printer. This he had carefully folded into quarters and run his fingernail along the creases to further define the shape. Then he extracted a single sheet of three-ply toilet paper, also purloined from his lawyer's office. He glanced up, seeing the waitress approaching with his coffee and pie. He slipped the paper-pulp sheet under the envelope; it was an odd object to be seen on a cafeteria table, so it would be remembered. Attention to detail had been his watchword during his professional life, and now, on the verge of a long and tranquil retirement, was not the time to get sloppy.

He waited until his hot apple pie, topped with vanilla ice cream and a shading of powdered cinnamon, was placed before him. He smiled at the waitress, then leaned forward to inhale deeply, savoring the smell of the thick slice and the equally enticing aroma of the fresh brew in the large mug nearby. He watched, mesmerized, taking sensuous pleasure as the ice cream turned to rivulets and dripped down to the dish to pool in inviting chaos.

Food first, then business, he thought.

As the pie portion steadily diminished, his thoughts went to the two documents he had to write. The first was easy; he had drafted the text mentally hundreds of times since he had made his decision three weeks ago. It was essential to strike the right balance; to appeal to the recipient's curiosity as a means to overcome initial rejection. Then the decision would be out of his hands and back where it truly belonged. He smiled at this thought, pleased with its deeper meanings.

The second document was another matter. He had much experience in writing similar missives, yet he felt this needed to be given special consideration; it was, after all, to be his last. He mused on the mechanics as he sipped the remaining dark liquid in his mug.

The waitress approached, enquiring if he wanted more coffee or anything else. He requested another mug of the blend, then, just as the waitress turned to take his empty pie dish and cup back to the kitchen...

"Do you have a pen I could borrow for a minute?"

"This do?" The waitress proffered a ubiquitous blue-ink disposable.

"That would be perfect." He took the pen, smiled again, and turned his attention to the folded sheet of white paper.

The agent used the top of the passenger seat to steady the Helios monocular. He was using it on the maximum setting of twenty-five power magnification and even the slightest tremor made the image wobble. He was only half a block from the cafeteria with a clear view of Polanski seated inside, yet the potent zoom offered by the black, rubberized cylinder was necessary to observe the details.

“He’s just ordered another coffee.”

He spoke for the benefit of the people listening on the speaker at the other end of the phone call.

“Just sitting there?” The voice carried agitation, impatience, fear; all mixed into a flat echo by the cellphone’s speaker.

“He’s slightly turned away, both hands on the table...”

“Can you see the device? Is he using it? Describe it!”

“I can’t tell from here.” The agent paused, taking his eye from the single lens and scanning the street. “I could try to get closer but there’s not much cover. It’s so hot, the street is practically empty and I’m sure to be spotted.”

“No, no, we can’t risk that. Stay where you are. Try to see if he’s using it.”

He chose not to reply; monitoring the use of the device was, after all, one of the prime objectives of Phase Two of the mission. Phase One’s goal had been identifying it and they had failed miserably at that. Polanski’s detention, for the two years the trial had taken, had not helped. The guy was smart; he’d not been caught in over twenty years. As soon as he suspected they were going to move in, he had hidden the device, left it with someone, whatever. Covert searches of his hotel suite, his lawyer’s office and any of the other twenty or thirty places he had frequented in the days leading to the arrest had turned up nothing. Did he have it again? Had the attorney collected it for him? They should have executed another search there a couple of days ago as he had suggested.

Polanski looked toward the street.

The agent placed his eye against the monocular again.

It was almost as though his target was staring directly at him.

Polanski raised his right hand; he held something, used it to salute his observer across the intervening distance. The agent twisted the zoom ring on the scope, but it was already wound up to the max. The man held a disposable pen. He had been writing something. He knew the agent was watching; not really a surprise, more something to be expected given the situation. Still, he’d been made. He called it in, not anticipating any change in his orders. Stay put. Watch. Observe. Call if you see the device. SWAT was staged two blocks over; ETA sixty seconds if needed.

The agent saw Polanski’s hand drop back down to the table, watched as his body turned a little more to adopt a more comfortable posture as he continued his writing.

He was completely unaware the circumstances had just changed drastically.

It had been a long day for Robert Polanski's lawyer; in truth, it had been a long two years. He should have known this case was going to be unlike any other he had handled when the accused, his *client*, had entered his office one month before his arrest. Polanski had known he was under surveillance by the Feds, knew it was a matter of time before they would charge him, but wanted to control the whole matter. Initially the attorney had said no. Polanski had just nodded, then stood and left the office without speaking.

The next day he returned unannounced. He brought two large suitcases with him whose contents he proceeded to dump onto the lawyer's desk. Three million dollars! That got his attention, and his services.

It should also have warned him about Polanski. Maybe, deep down in the darkest recesses of his conscience, in that place where morality and rectitude hide when temptation comes calling, maybe, just maybe, a lone, subjugated word of caution was voiced. Yet its scolding went unheeded. From that first moment he had danced to the fiddler's tune, as and when the musician demanded.

Initially, his work had been easy; more about insuring the FBI did not overstep his client's Constitutional Rights than creating any kind of defense strategy. Polanski had insisted, from the suitcase-delivery day, that a defense would not be necessary. He had never actually denied his guilt to his lawyer; he was just sure the Feds would never be able to prove the case. It began to dawn on the attorney Polanski was more interested in the Double Jeopardy clause in the Fifth Amendment than in proving his innocence. Under this provision, Polanski, once acquitted, could never be retried for the same crimes.

There was a momentary insight the lawyer remembered well. It had occurred on a Friday evening as he closed the last of the case folders the District Attorney's Office had sent. Yes, there were hundreds of accusations, all premeditated murder, cold, clinical assassinations, yet there was not one piece of solid evidence against his client. In most instances when the crime had been committed, Polanski had a rock-solid alibi complete with multiple witnesses. Sure, he had been in the same city during the same period for all the cases, but that had been brushed off as mere coincidence. Some coincidence: 217 coincidences to be precise. That wasn't coincidence; that was excellent planning. Somehow his client, this tall, slender man with the permanent smile, had engineered these murders. Perfect crimes; not just one, but by his own admission, many more than the Feds had uncovered. How he had accomplished this perplexed the lawyer. He had asked once before, after the first month of the trial, when the doubts had formed a mountain in his conscience, but Polanski had dropped the smile; just stared at him with those steely-grey eyes; said nothing. The matter had been dropped, openly, although the suspicions remained. He had handled several cases of mistaken identity, of some poor soul being charged, even by Federal investigators, with crimes they had not committed... yet this was not one of those. He was as sure of Polanski's guilt as he was the sun rose in the morning.

Had the Feds panicked? Had they seen the death total rise to figures that induced nightmares and decided to act, to try to curtail this, before they were ready? He didn't know, and today, now it was all over, he cared even less.

The attorney, for the first time in his long career, felt dirty. He had sold out Justice, could even name the price: the physical one sitting in large safe-deposit boxes at three banks; the moral one, unquantifiable.

He stood, shook his whole body as though ridding himself of the whole sorry affair, then crossed to his office door.

Outside his assistant looked up, not expecting him to leave so early.

"Angela, cancel everything I've got for the next two weeks. Take the fortnight off too, with pay; call it an extra vacation period. I'm not going to be locatable until I've spent a couple of weeks sipping Mai Tais as I watch the sun go down on a tropical beach somewhere." He smiled and headed for the outer door.

The heat in the underground garage threatened to burn his nostrils and evaporate all the moisture from his pores. He reached his car, flipped the key fob door opener and dumped his jacket and briefcase in the back. As soon as his rump hit the driver's seat, his hand reached for the air-conditioning, turning it up to maximum.

He started the car and sat for a few minutes, waiting in the darkness, until the interior temperature resembled more a New England October than July in Arizona. As he sat, he mentally planned his next moves: a quick trip home to pack a case and grab his passport, then off to the airport to hire a private jet; destination Paradise.

He reached for his seat belt.

Instead of the familiar collaboration, it refused to unreel. He tugged again and again, each time more insistently. It was jammed. He let it go, then tried pulling smoothly. Still nothing. No worry; the trip was not far and, at this time of day, with the sun high overhead, there was not much traffic about. He would be okay as long as some overzealous cop did not pull him over.

Polanski screwed up the single sheet of toilet paper, now replete with close-spaced writing, and used his spoon to push it into his third cup of coffee. The order of the extra caffeine had not been in response to the need for a jolt after so long incarcerated, but to provide the means to destroy the evidence linking him to what was about to happen.

He stirred the sheet slowly, watching as the hot liquid broke its fibers and turned the excellent coffee into unpalatable sludge. He knew that even with the latest in document forensic science, no one was going to recover what had been written on that page.

He smiled, glanced at his watch, and wondered how long he would have to wait. He called the waitress and paid his bill, adding a generous tip. Then he folded the single sheet of inkjet paper twice and inserted it into the padded envelope. Finally he picked up the narrow box of unpolished wood, opened its lid and admired the contents for the last time. He placed the object on the table, debating if he was doing the right thing. Yes, it was time. He'd had a good run; made millions off this once he had figured it out. He knew the Feds, plus others of a more dangerous disposition, were following him and although he would lose the tail he had today, it would not take them long to find him again. Yes, now was a good moment to retire.

He had no living family, so sending the box and its contents to a distant relative was out of the question. Regarding friends: well, in his line of business that had been a luxury he had avoided. Perhaps that would change now, who knows. He chuckled softly, drawing the attention of the waitress. He smiled at her, slipped the closed box into the envelope, pressed down the self-adhesive flap, then checked he had not left anything on the table or the nearby floor; anything incriminating, that was.

With a last glance at the slurry in his coffee cup, he stood and made for the door.

The heat hit him like a physical blow as he stepped outside. His suit jacket was draped over his arm, hiding the envelope underneath from the view of the agent in the car on the opposite side of the street. He spied a mailbox on the sidewalk some fifty feet away and calmly strolled toward it.

A squeal of rubber against overheated asphalt knifed through the air.

The lawyer was in trouble and he knew it.

First it had been the blinking lights on the dashboard.

Then the accelerator pedal lowered of its own accord. A smell of burning, the smoky tang of electrical insulation, emanated from somewhere below.

The car accelerated. He stomped on the brake pedal and it sank to its maximum depth, yet the car refused to slow.

More angry red lights illuminated the dashboard.

MAJOR FAILURE. STOP IMMEDIATELY.

If only he could.

He pumped the brake pedal, seeking resistance, response, acknowledgement he still had some control over the heavy vehicle. Nothing. It steadfastly rebuffed his attempts, remaining fixed to the floor.

He was doing eighty now, the speed slowly climbing.

Thank God the streets were almost empty. A few cars were parked at the curbs.

That's it, he thought

Turn on to a side street where there would be more cars and brush against them; use friction to slow his car.

He yanked the wheel to the right, taking the first road on offer. A one-way, cars parked on both sides. Only one pedestrian he could see. Wait! Wasn't that...?

The car bounced along the sides of four parked vehicles, sparks flying, wing mirrors made missiles. The crunch of metal against metal screamed through the heavy air. Two wheels left the ground as his car rode up the wall of parked cars. The front nearside tire impacted against the back of the next car in line, flipping him around. Rubber bit into the road surface; a deadly tumble ensued.

The luxury sedan left the ground, now travelling almost upside down. The lawyer, without a seat belt to keep him in position, was thrown around the interior. He was unaware of the man exiting the car parked on the far side of the road.

The heavy vehicle traversed the lane in less than a second, smashing its side into the parked car, crushing the scrambling man. Its momentum flipped it in the air, its brief trajectory abruptly halted by entwined metal, causing it to slam down on top of the occupied vehicle.

Instantly fire started. Sparks, metal heated through friction, and gasoline pouring from the ruptured tank, were not a good mix.

In the narrow street, the explosion and resultant shockwave blew in the windows of the coffee shop.

Fifty feet away, a man dropped a package into a mailbox, turned, smiled, and walked toward the junction.