

KILLING RED

By

Henry Perez

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KILLING RED

“Sometimes a book comes along that invigorates and breathes new life into a genre. Henry Perez’s *Killing Red* is just such a novel. Here is a debut that blends mystery and suspense into a riveting thriller. Intense, lightning-paced, brilliantly executed, *Killing Red* is a novel that demands to be read in one sitting. A sensational and amazing debut!”

—**James Rollins**, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of
The Judas Strain

“*Killing Red* is an intense, smart read, and Alex Chapa is a character of flesh and blood. A terrific debut—bravo!”

—**Marcus Sakey**, Bestselling Author of *Brilliance*,
Good People, and *The Blade Itself*

“*Killing Red* heralds a meteoric debut! Compulsively readable, and crafted with surgical skill. Do not start this book at night if you want to get any sleep, because you will be up until you cross the finish line – pulse racing, skin sweaty – but happy as hell you decided to go on this magnificent thrill ride. Highest recommendation!”

—**Jay Bonansinga**, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of
Frozen and *Walking Dead: Descent*

“Taut, provocative, and unforgettable.”

—**Tasha Alexander**, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of
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“Henry Perez has crafted an astonishing debut thriller that showcases both his reporter’s eye for detail and some serious writing chops. Fasten your seatbelt and prepare for a sleepless night. Once you pick up *Killing Red*, you won’t put it down.”

—**Sean Chercover**, award winning author of *The Trinity Game* and
Big City Bad Blood

“*Killing Red* is smart, chilling and unputdownable,”

—**Laura Caldwell**, author of *False Impressions* and
Question of Trust

“Great! Fast, frightening, and pure literary dynamite. *Killing Red* is the best debut thriller I have ever read.”

—**J.A. Konrath**, Bestselling Author of
Whiskey Sour, and *The List*

DEDICATION

*For everyone in my life who always believed
this day would come.*

PROLOGUE

The night that Grubb buried Annie Sykes he watched and waited behind a cover of young trees. For more than forty-five minutes the child did not move, and Grubb could easily have assumed she was dead. But somehow the killer knew that was not the case.

Grubb didn't make a habit of sticking around after disposing of his victims, and none of the other bodies were dealt with in such a public manner. Annie was different. She had been more resistant and stubborn than the others. From the moment Grubb had snatched the ten-year-old there was something about her he found unsettling.

Annie was not buried in the traditional sense. Grubb had taken her limp body to a clearing in a small patch of woods a couple of miles from his house. There he opened a hole in the cold dirt just big enough to fit the child in head first, past her shoulders and almost up to her elbows, but not all the way in. He then meticulously fastened her head to the ground by putting a dog collar around her neck and securing it with tent spikes. But that was just a precaution and a bit of symbolism. The job of terminating Grubb's tenth victim belonged to what should have been a lethal mixture of depressants that he'd injected into Annie's thin veins.

From the withering tree branches above, to the lifeless autumn soil below, death was at home in this place. Something about that gave Grubb a rare feeling of tranquility. A sense of relief was slowly beginning to come

over him as the minutes passed and he detected no movement that would suggest the child was still breathing. That changed when he saw Annie's small body twitch.

At first, Grubb told himself it was just a trick of the full moon's light. He had carefully measured out the right amount of each of the three drugs, then added a little more. But she twitched again, then again, and Kenny Lee Grubb was frightened for one of the few times in his life.

A curtain of sweat gathered along Grubb's brow, though he was anything but warm. He quietly circled around the edge of the woods as the child struggled to free herself, too spooked by the way she appeared to have come back to life to get any closer. Then suddenly she was free. When she rose from the dirt, Grubb became convinced he was watching a ghost. He had believed all along that this child was more evil than the others, and this confirmed it.

Of the many images in Grubb's life that would haunt anyone else, the one that lingered most was of Annie Sykes standing in that field, covered in dried blood and fresh dirt. She looked around, then looked in his direction. Pretending she didn't see him, Grubb thought. Toying with him. Evil.

With as little movement as possible, he searched the area immediately around him until he found what he was looking for. Autumn was only a few weeks old, but dead leaves had already covered much of the thick, three-foot length of broken branch that lay just beyond Grubb's reach.

He took a cautious step in its direction, while keeping his eyes on the child, then leaned down and picked up the heavy shaft of cold wood. Grubb squeezed his makeshift weapon until his palms burned, and he liked the way that felt.

Then he tightened his grip even more and began searching for the best angle from which to attack.

Annie's mind was racing with questions. What time was it? How long had she been there? Why did someone bury her head in the ground? Maybe

the rest of her didn't fit. Maybe someone needed a bigger shovel to open a larger hole for the rest of her. In that case, they'd be back. Soon.

Where was she? She removed enough dirt from her eyes to be able to look around and see it was a clear night, but none of what she saw looked familiar. Maybe she was in a faraway place, or it could be she was in the backyard of that house.

Wait, what house? She remembered. The one where the man who always smelled like he'd been sweating a lot had taken her. Annie thought that she'd seen the same tall man at her school a few times. Now she remembered more things about him. Things that she never wanted to think about again.

Annie decided that she wasn't going to be scared any more. Just like her dad had taught her when she was younger, and couldn't go to sleep without a night-light because she was certain there were monsters in the world, and something horrible hiding in the dark. She'd reluctantly accepted her father's view that the monsters were created in her mind, and learned how to take charge of her fear and gradually make it go away.

It was time to shove those fears aside and go home. But she stood up too quickly, and pain flared across her chest. In the moonlight, Annie saw that the front of her dress was stained dark brown with dirt and sweat. It was the same dress she'd been wearing since the last time she was home. For a moment Annie worried her mother might get angry with her for ruining it. She tried to pull the cloth away from her cold skin, but that hurt more than anything.

Annie looked down at her pale bare feet and saw that the hole her head had been buried in wasn't as deep as she'd expected. The spikes that pinned the collar to the ground were barely visible. Only a small portion of each was exposed, the rest had been swallowed up by dirt. Annie knew she could never have pulled them out, and was proud of herself for having figured out another way.

The clearing she was standing in was surrounded by what looked like a forest. The onset of fall had not yet stripped the trees all the way down to

their skeletal limbs. A fierce wind blowing through the leaves startled her. Then she heard a sound that was not made by the wind. Then another.

She was not alone.

Annie thought about trying to stand as perfectly still as she could and maybe whoever or whatever was out there would not see her. A crackling sound, then another, closer, and Annie knew she had to start running—now.

To her left, Annie saw a small opening through a collection of thin trees. She ran faster, until the wind was rushing past her face. As she weaved through the narrow trail, a tangle of unforgiving, sharp branches tore at her bare ankles. Ignoring the pain, she headed for a path just a little to her right. Every few strides, one of her feet would land on something coarse, but Annie knew she couldn't let that slow her down.

Annie wanted to look back, but thought better of it. Then she realized that whatever was after her wasn't trailing behind, it was just on the other side of a long row of trees on her right. It was running *with* her, no more than thirty feet away.

Nothing that her mom or dad had ever taught Annie could keep her from being afraid now. Why did Dad send her into that store all by herself? Was it because he believed Annie was old enough, or because he didn't want to interrupt the conversation he was having on his phone? Why had he left Annie unprotected, giving that man the chance to talk a young girl into going to the storage room, then out the back door?

Can't think about that now. It's getting closer.

Out of the corner of her eye Annie thought she saw the monster cut through the row of trees and move in behind her. Without slowing down, Annie allowed herself a quick glance back, and saw she was right. Whatever was chasing her appeared to be made of shadows and night. It was tall and fast, and Annie thought she'd seen that one arm was longer than the other. But then she understood what she'd really seen. The monster was holding something long and thick up over its head. And it was closing in on Annie—fast.

Annie felt the footsteps closely tracing her own, and realized she could not outrun it. There was no place to duck into, no gap in the bushes and

trees, so Annie decided to make an opening. She rushed into a tiny space between two thick bushes, kept her balance, and pushed through what seemed like a forest of angry branches, until she finally came to a clearing on the other side.

She willed herself to run faster than she ever had before, but nearly tripped over her own feet. Through the muck that the sweat from her brow had carried into her eyes Annie saw a building in the distance, beyond the scattered lights of a parking lot. Running toward the first sign of civilization she had seen in a long time, Annie thought she heard the monster yell something, but couldn't make out what it was and didn't care.

Monsters trick you with their lies.

The building was getting closer now, and beyond it Annie saw a row of homes, but nothing that she recognized. As she came up around the side of the building, Annie realized that the noises of the night, real and imagined, were gone. She heard her heavy breathing, then the sound of her small wounded feet slapping the pavement.

A moment later she was standing under the large well-lit sign above the door. It was the kind of small store her mom and dad shopped at when it was late and they needed to get something after all the other places had closed. She couldn't remember ever seeing this one before, though.

When she reached the doors, Annie turned and looked back toward the woods for the first time. She could barely make out a vague shape within the darkness of the trees. And though she could not see its face, Annie was certain the monster was staring back at her.

Dominic Delacruz wasn't supposed to be at the store that Tuesday, the one he would refer to as *That Night*, for the rest of his life. One of his workers had called in sick, another needed to leave early, and he didn't like his son to work on school nights. That meant Dominic had to fill in until his replacement arrived at 5:00 A.M.

It was just shy of midnight, and he had almost finished stocking the magazine rack when he noticed the small figure standing outside the store, just beyond the reach of the automatic door sensor. Moving closer, Dominic saw it was a girl in a dress, and he immediately knew something wasn't right. Her long hair appeared to be matted down, like something was covering it, and she wasn't wearing a coat, though it could not have been more than thirty-five degrees out there.

The fact that she was alone was certainly unusual, but Dominic figured that the girl had probably raced her father or mother from the car to the door. Or maybe something was wrong.

She wasn't moving, just standing in place. Though Dominic was free of superstitions, he decided at that moment that if ghosts really did exist, this child could be the genuine article.

That thought chilled him to the core.

Walking toward the front, he was just a few feet from the door when the child abruptly turned and quickly entered the store. She stopped when she saw Dominic, and he froze at the sight of her stained dress and muddy legs.

Through the dirt that covered her head he could see patches of what appeared to be vibrant red hair. He instinctively reached forward and wiped some of the filth from the girl's face, then stopped, thinking that some of this might be evidence of a crime.

"I need your help," she said suddenly, though it seemed like getting those few words out was hard work for the child.

Dominic squatted down to her eye level.

"What is your name?"

"I need your help," she repeated, and looked back toward the door. This time Dominic saw the terror in her eyes. He could almost feel her fear, and realized whatever was happening might not yet be over.

Dominic touched her arms and was stunned by how cold they were, as though she'd been lying in a grave. He took off his work smock and wrapped it around her shoulders. That's when he noticed the deep scratches

on the child's arms and how the dress stuck to her trembling body in those areas where it seemed to be painted a shiny dark brown.

He stared at the wounded child for a moment until he thought he saw something move outside of the store. Dominic slowly walked in the direction of the movement, each step measured. He stopped before reaching the automatic door sensor, and carefully studied the area just outside the front of his store, but saw only darkness beyond the parking lot lights. There had been several frightening nights back when he owned a store in Chicago, but nothing that had prepared him for this.

Dominic thought about taking the child into the back room, hidden away from whoever might still be out there. But he didn't want to let her out of his sight. So he walked her to the narrow stretch behind the counter and told her to sit down on the floor, which she did without hesitation.

After another long look in the direction of the parking lot, Dominic reached into a small drawer under the register, pulled out the .44, and checked to make sure it was loaded. Dominic knew that whoever had done such terrible things to this little girl would be looking for her, and maybe already knew exactly where she was.

He dialed 9-1-1, and did his best to explain what was happening. After he hung up, Dominic wondered if he should offer her some ice cream, or anything. That could wait.

"You'll be all right now," he said to the girl without taking his eyes off the door or loosening his grip on the gun.

That was sixteen years ago, and not a night has gone by since without Dominic thinking about that frightened, broken little girl. Sometimes, when he's alone at the store late at night and the door opens, it startles him for just a moment and he imagines that she's about to walk in again.

Then Dominic goes home and prays for the gift of forgetting. But that prayer never gets answered.

Alex Chapa, just a little more than a year out of college, was hiding in a corner of the cramped newsroom. The only other writer in the office that night was playing Tetris on one of the two computers in the room. Down the hall, Betty the Layout Lady—few at the *Tri-Cities Bulletin* seemed to know her last name—was putting the final touches on section one.

Back turned to Murphy and the annoying sounds of his game, Chapa was working on a feature story that wouldn't earn him an extra penny, but might at least help him feel better about his job. So far, the newspaper business hadn't been as fulfilling as he'd imagined—personally, professionally, or financially.

A phone rang two desks away.

“Wrong number,” Murphy barked, refusing to break eye-contact with the monitor.

Chapa leaned back in his office chair and looked over at his colleague.

“Might be Carter checking in. He does that.”

“Not during his fishing trips, he doesn't. Let it go, Alex.”

Ross Carter was the *Bulletin's* lone columnist. A respected pro who had been in the business longer than the lakes he loved to fish had been wet. Chapa looked up to Carter a little bit when he first started at the paper. But over time Chapa had starting wondering if the guy was just drifting along on cruise control. Counting the days until his last byline.

Another ring.

“Oh, hell.” Chapa rolled over to Carter's desk.

“You touch it, you own it,” Murphy said as Chapa reached for the phone, lifting the handset just before the next ring cut out.

“*Tri-Cities Bulletin*, news desk.”

“Carter?”

“No, Alex Chapa. Carter's not here.”

“Shit.”

“Can I help you?”

“How soon will Carter be back?”

“Not till next week.”

“Shit. Do you have a number I can get him at?”

“Not really. He’s on a lake, up in Wisconsin.”

A thick sigh.

“I can take a message if you like.”

“No. It’ll all be over by the time Carter gets it.”

Chapa turned away from Murphy and lowered his voice. “Whatever it is, I’m certain that I can help you.”

“And what makes you think that?”

“Because the urgency in your voice suggests that whatever this is about, matters, and not in a selfish way, no, it’s not about you, it’s bigger than any one person, and you have the clarity to understand that, which means you also understand that it’s bigger than Carter, or any reporter.” Chapa turned away from the mouthpiece, drew a breath, heard Murphy ask him if he was all right, ignored the question.

“Yeah, okay, buddy. But Carter has to know that this came from Bulldog.”

“Bulldog?”

“He’ll know who you’re talking about.”

“So what are we talking about, Bulldog?” Chapa asked, straining to sound casual.

Silence. And Chapa feared he’d lost the guy.

“It’s a police raid. Going down in about forty-five minutes. Maybe less.”

“Where?”

More silence.

“Look, I’ll be sure and let Carter know this came from Bulldog. I’ve already written it down. Now, while it still matters, where is this going to happen?”

He gave Chapa the address, but it was hard to believe that anything criminal could be happening in that corner of Chicago’s suburbs. It was a

place populated by folks with membership cards to clubs, and close ties to their church affiliations, living in color-coordinated houses on clean, freshly resurfaced streets.

“It’s about that missing girl, Annie Sykes.”

Chapa knew the case. A week ago, on the evening of October 7, the ten-year-old had gone missing after she walked into Rudi’s Foods in West Chicago and was never seen walking out.

“They found her?”

“Not exactly. She sort of found them, more or less. Escaped from some psycho late last night.”

“*Last* night?”

“Yeah, she walked into some convenience store, and the owner called the cops.” There was a slight wheeze in Bulldog’s voice, leading Chapa to decide he was a long-time smoker. “Then she spent last night and all day today in the hospital for observation. The cops kept that under wraps. But now, tonight, about an hour ago, she led them to where the guy lives.”

“You know what that guy’s name is?”

“Yes, Grubb, Kenneth L. They got the house under heavy surveillance while they put a team together.”

Across the room, Murphy yelled something about finishing a level, then, “You still on the phone, Alex?”

Chapa nodded casually, rolling his eyes, feigning exasperation.

“I’ll tell you what, Bulldog, I’ll talk you up to Carter, big time, if you forget all of this right now, and no other reporter gets a phone call tonight.”

“You mean that?”

“Absolutely.”

Chapa hung up the phone, grabbed his jacket and tape recorder, and headed for the door like it was nothing at all.

“You got something, Alex, or just making a food run?”

“Maybe something, we’ll see.”

“I warned you.”

“That you did, Murph.”

Chapa sprinted across the parking lot and into his car. He pounded the accelerator of his old Honda Civic, tearing down country roads, quickly narrowing the distance to the address Bulldog had given him, while keeping an eye out for any squads.

Can't afford to get a ticket. Can't afford to lose time, either. The house was only a few miles away, but the minutes seemed to be passing by faster than the darkened Midwestern landscape.

Once he crossed Route 59 and the Grandville city limits, Chapa let rip and did fifty down quiet residential streets, confident that every available cop in town would be part of the team gathering to storm a sleepy, well-manicured neighborhood.

Chapa pulled into the Pleasant Highlands subdivision less than twenties minutes after he'd left the newspaper office. Grubb's house was at the far end of a labyrinth of short, narrow streets near the middle of a longer center drive. Chapa tried to get as close as possible. But the cops had blocked off both ends of the wide, curving street and he had to park around the corner and a block and a half down from the house.

Choosing his palm-size notebook instead of a larger more conspicuous one, Chapa grabbed a couple of pens, took a calming breath, and stepped out of his car. He decided to try the most direct path first, and walked down a street that ran parallel to the one he needed to get to. Folks in nightgowns and sweats drifted like moths in the direction of the police activity, only to be turned away before they could get near enough to see what was going on. Chapa couldn't afford to be turned away, couldn't risk drawing that much attention to himself. He needed to find another way.

As he walked with a smattering of half-awake neighbors who were quietly speculating on what all the fuss was about, Chapa kept looking around for a way in. He was getting closer to the police barricade than he wanted to be, when he spotted a small park nestled between a cluster of houses.

Ducking away from the would-be gawkers, he cut down a driveway, and through a backyard, drawing a response from a set of motion sensors that roused security lights. Ignoring the sudden unwanted attention, Chapa slipped past a row of bushes and emerged on the other side, no more than twenty yards from a jungle gym.

The park was quiet, empty. A lone light post illuminated the area around the swings. Chapa thought about the children who played in this park. Wondered if their parents would ever again feel safe there. Or if the place would now have a taint.

Locating the paved path that led from the park to the sidewalk beyond, Chapa eyed the street where all of the heavy action was going down. He knew he wouldn't fit in with any group of officials at the scene. His faded jeans, the fabric starting to split at the cuff, and University of Iowa sweatshirt couldn't pass as anyone's official uniform. Except maybe that of recent college grad trying to make it as a reporter. But Chapa just played it cool, like he had a hall pass in his back pocket, and strolled down the sidewalk and past huddles of heavily armed officers.

"How the hell did you get here?"

Officer Steven Zirbel's voice startled Chapa, but the reporter was already working on his response before realizing who was talking.

"Steve, you're out late tonight."

"And you're where you don't belong, Alex."

The two men had gotten to know each other a couple of months back when Chapa spent the night with a police detail at a roadside checkpoint. Zirbel, who oversaw the operation, liked the way the story turned out, and though he was always cautious, the lieutenant had become somewhat of a source Chapa could rely on.

"I understand you guys are about to bring in a very bad guy."

"And how do you know that?"

Chapa smiled and shrugged as Zirbel moved in close.

"Look, Alex, you need to move on," he said, his voice measured. "I'll give you a call in the morning after the smoke clears."

“That’s no good, Steve. I’m holding up page one right now. I’ve got to have something.”

Zirbel looked away, in the direction of the house, then to where a group of men from various jurisdictions had assembled. When he focused his attention back on Chapa the reporter could almost hear the wheels turning inside the cop’s head.

“You keep my name out of it, unless I call you and tell you otherwise,” the officer jabbed an index finger at Chapa, who nodded. He knew Zirbel had been angling for a promotion and the right story could put him over the top. The wrong one might knock him back to the overnight shift at the evidence desk.

Zirbel laid out how twenty-four hours ago Annie Sykes walked into Dominic Delacruz’s store and everything that followed and how she had led them here.

“You’re going in awfully hard on one girl’s word, Steve.”

“She’s a very convincing little girl.”

Chapa followed Zirbel’s eyes to the three people standing by a cruiser’s open door. He recognized Roger Sykes, a man in his mid thirties who dressed like the middle manager that he was.

“Is that her?” Chapa asked, pointing to the small redheaded child wedged between her parents.

“They insisted on being here when we take him. We told them to stay in the car, but they weren’t too interested in anything we had to say.”

A guy decked out in protective gear called for Zirbel.

“Go back to where you came from, Alex,” Zirbel said, then walked over to a group that looked like it was primed to go into battle.

Cloaked in as much confidence as he could conjure, Chapa walked down the sidewalk in the direction of the Sykes family. He nodded to a uniformed who was staring at him, but didn’t break stride. Making sure Roger Sykes saw him as he approached, Chapa pulled out the small notebook and a pen, then introduced himself.

“My wife and I have appreciated how the newspapers publicized Annie’s disappearance, but not the way you guys came after me and her mother.”

“I know my paper may have been off base, but—”

Michele Sykes cut Chapa off. “It was those incompetent jerks in the police department.” She was pleasant looking in a fresh, rural Illinois way. “They couldn’t find our daughter, and I still don’t know how anyone could have thought Roger was involved. That was just a terrible thing for us. People should be ashamed of themselves.”

Annie Sykes had been looking up at Chapa the entire time. When he returned the attention she took it as a cue that it was her turn.

“I’m looking forward to going home,” her tone strong, voice driven with determination. “But first I want to see the police get that terrible man.”

“You got away from him, didn’t you?” Chapa asked, kneeling to meet her at eye-level.

She nodded, “I wasn’t afraid, not too much,” and almost smiled.

“How did you recognize the house from the outside?”

“I remembered some of the streets that he turned on when he brought me here in his van.” Then she pointed to an area of fencing that Chapa could barely make out in the darkness. “And I remember seeing that through a window in the basement. I have a really good memory.”

“It’s been a horrible time, and we’ll be talking to our attorney after all this is over,” Roger said, then put a protective arm around his daughter, as though it could shield her from everything. “But we’re just thankful that Annie’s back and we can put all this behind us. I love Annie very much. She’s a strong person, and she’s my little girl. I don’t care what anyone said about me, I’m just so glad she’s back.”

A shot exploded inside the house. Now the police were rushing around like scattered ants, ordering each other to get down, get back, get ready. Chapa got shoved aside as Annie and her parents were hustled into the squad car. He made his way around to the back of the vehicle so he could

get a decent view of the house. Leaning on the trunk of the car, Chapa quickly took notes as the police rushed the house.

A chaotic minute passed. Then a guy wearing a flak jacket over a gray suit appeared on the front porch. "It's all over," he said, then signaled for paramedics to move in.

Chapa was also on the move. Getting as close as he could without drawing attention, he stopped just beyond the reach of a streetlight. He waited there until Zirbel walked out of the house and was crossing the front yard.

"Steve, who got shot?"

"Didn't I tell you to get out of here?"

"And I was doing just that when I heard the shot. You can't hold this back now."

Zirbel appeared to take stock of the situation.

"I assume one of your officers shot the suspect, let's start with that, Steve."

"One shot, in the chest."

"So the suspect was armed?"

"When we entered the house we found Kenneth Lee Grubb in the dining room. The moment the suspect saw us, he put down a piece of bread he was eating and appeared to reach for a weapon even though he'd been told to remain still, that's when the officer fired."

Chapa's hand was racing across the yellow tablet, as he made certain he didn't miss a word.

"What kind of weapon?"

Zirbel hesitated for a moment as he surveyed the immediate area.

"Damnedest thing I've ever seen. A large animal collar with long metal spikes sticking out of it." Zirbel leaned in close to Chapa and used his height advantage to cast a shadow over the reporter. "But I'd appreciate it if you kept that detail to yourself for the time being."

"I will, Steve," Chapa said, drawing a large oval around the last part of Zirbel's statement, then writing the word *No* in large letters next to it.

“Do right by the department, Alex,” Zirbel added, then turned to a uniformed and told him to escort Chapa back to his car.

Once he was back in his car, it took Chapa a moment to regain his bearings and find the fastest way out of the subdivision. Then he quickly drove away, stopped at a pay phone six blocks later, and called the office. It took some coaxing to talk Betty the Layout Lady into delaying the printing of page one, even more to convince her to do a redesign.

“You got eight hundred words, young man, give or take a dozen, no more, and one hour to get them to me.”

He thanked her, then dialed information and got a home number for Dominic Delacruz. The store owner didn’t sound like he’d been sleeping, but he wasn’t anxious to get media attention, either. Still, Chapa managed to squeeze a solid, if reluctant, quote out of him.

Winded and running on high octane, Chapa had just sat down at his desk to write his story when he got a call from Zirbel, who gave him the okay to use his name in the story, and filled in a few more of the details.

“After we secured the rest of the house, we cautiously headed for the basement, and found evidence that someone had been kept down there,” Zirbel said. “We believe that at least one other child had been held there.”

“Why, what did you find?”

After another hesitation, Zirbel said, “Children’s snacks, a boy’s T-shirt, and a dozen or so comic books in a small room in the basement.”

“There was more than one room?”

“Several. Each appears to have been used for a different purpose. It’s going to take a while to sort everything out, but we believe that some of the victims may have started out in a makeshift guest room before being transferred to other parts of the large basement.”

He told Chapa that the officers removed several bottles of a liquid that had yet to be identified.

“We’re waiting for the lab results, but we’re reasonably certain the bottles contain whatever drug the suspect used on his victims,” Zirbel said.

“So if there were other kids down there, where are they now?”

“We don’t know yet. Grubb is considered a suspect in at least four other disappearances over the past three months,” Zirbel said. “But that’s the first question I’m going to ask him when the son-of-a-bitch comes out of intensive care.”

The story came in at 844 words, and Betty the Layout Lady forgave him for that. It would be one of the last Chapa would ever write for the *Tri-Cities Bulletin*.

The reporter didn’t sleep that night as he waited for the morning’s *Bulletin* to arrive. Sleep would become precious and uneasy in the days and months that followed. For a while he took comfort in the certainty that it would all pass in time. But he was wrong.

Sixteen years and millions of printed words later, spanning hundreds of topics, the story that launched Alex Chapa’s career still dogged him.

SIX DAYS BEFORE THE EXECUTION

CHAPTER 1

The heavy door closed as tightly as the lid of a casket. But the sliding of large metal bolts that secured it in place was never as loud as Alex Chapa expected. There was no echo, and the sounds from the rest of the world were immediately shut out, leaving this most secure cage within a cage in the grip of a stifling silence.

The reporter had visited Pennington Correctional a number of times before, always in a professional capacity, but it never got any easier. Beneath the well-crafted illusion of order and security, but never too far from the surface, lay a pit of anger and violence populated by men who had long ago discarded whatever tattered humanity they ever possessed.

Chapa had to remind himself that he would be leaving, and could go whenever he chose. That was comforting, but not as much as the knowledge that Kenny Lee Grubb did not have any of those options.

It had been an hour's drive to the prison from the *Chicago Record's* main office in Larkin, a mid-sized town about thirty miles west of Cook County, nestled among the city's largest suburbs. The drive had given Chapa a chance to gather his thoughts, but all the time in the world would never be enough to fully prepare for something like this.

The uniformed guard escorting him through the prison was built like a thick rectangular dining table that had been stood on one end. Chapa

listened to the man's stories about the three riots he'd survived during his eighteen years at Pennington.

"But I don't think we're due for one anytime soon," the guard added.

Things started looking familiar once they turned a corner and headed down a narrow hall. They passed a con working broom detail. The guy looked up and locked eyes with Chapa, who instantly knew he'd been sized-up and judged in a fraction of a second. Chapa didn't break eye contact, he just stared through the guy like no one was there. He had no fear of this asshole in prison garb. Wouldn't show any even if he did.

The mirror by the door to the special visiting room was covered with a month's worth of finger marks. Chapa used it to straighten the collar of his navy blue shirt, but didn't give a damn about anything else the mirror showed him. His early forties were passing by without leaving any new marks. Most of his hair was still naturally dark brown, and he'd determined earlier that morning that he didn't look a day over thirty-nine.

"This is as far as you go."

The guard's badge identified him simply as Harker. He had a well-traveled face punctuated by an overgrown mustache that contrasted with his cleanly shaved head. Harker opened the door and ushered Chapa into the cramped but clean space.

"You sit there," Harker said, pointing one of his callused fingers to the only chair on Chapa's half of the room. "Keep on your side of the table, and don't hand him anything."

Chapa did as he was told, then reached into his black leather satchel and pulled out a notepad, two pens, and his black, lighter-size digital recorder.

"You can't use that here," Harker said.

Chapa slipped the recorder back into the case, discreetly pushing the record button as he tucked it into place. He took a quick inventory of how many weapons Harker had on his person. Four—that Chapa could see.

He hadn't spoken with Grubb for six years. That was when the paper asked him to do a piece on the ten-year anniversary of the capture of one of

Illinois' most notorious mass murderers. It wasn't an assignment that Chapa had welcomed, but he knew it was coming. Every time a new Kenny Lee Grubb feature needed to be written, Alex Chapa was the *Chicago Record's* logical choice to write it.

The original story had fallen to Chapa when he was still a newbie at the smaller *Tri-Cities Bulletin*, and it helped him make a name for himself. A few weeks later he was introduced as the *Chicago Record's* newest columnist. The new job with the Chicago area's number two paper brought Chapa more than a significant boost in salary. But nothing matched the notoriety he gained from the Grubb story. There had been book offers, which Chapa had turned down because they would detract from the day-to-day reporting that he loved. He did short appearances on the ten o'clock news during Grubb's trial, and even considered an offer to host a cable network show before coming to his senses and getting on with his newspaper career.

It had been a very good career so far, and Chapa was confident his best work was still ahead of him. He had spent the years since trying to put some distance between himself and Grubb, and much of what had come with that early success. He had grown weary of the references to a sixteen-year-old story every time he was introduced at a speaking engagement. In the same way that musicians sometimes grow to despise that breakthrough single their fans demand they play at every concert, so it was that Chapa had become tired of being identified with his first big hit.

But in the quietest moments, Chapa understood that if he had been anywhere but at that news desk when the tip came in about Grubb's arrest he might still be a grunt reporter, covering restaurant openings and board meetings. Instead, he was able to devote his time and column inches to the subjects he cared about—the street gang infestation of the Midwest and the best efforts to solve the problem, failing schools and inspiring success stories, the struggles of immigrants and the plight of displaced American workers. There had been awards, as well as the resentment from some of

his peers that often follows success. He'd been lucky, then good.

Chapa's head was pounding from not getting much sleep the night before. He'd spent most of it in the dark, staring at his ceiling and wondering why the murderer of nine children had asked to see him, and only him, just six days before his execution.

Getting face time with anyone on death row wasn't easy, even harder when the subject is the prison's most infamous resident. But Chapa had been in the game long enough to know how to get meetings arranged and things done.

The small room had a heavy detergent smell, and there was something grotesque about that antiseptic odor in a place like this. It wasn't the room usually reserved for visits with the irredeemable. That one had thick glass between visitor and con, and communication was strictly through telephones. Here, Chapa and Grubb would be face to face with nothing but a four-foot, white laminate-top table and Officer Harker between them. Apparently, the warden was pleased with that series of stories the *Record* had run about Illinois' successful prison system.

Opening the notepad to a fresh page and uncapping each pen, Chapa laid it all out the way he wanted. Part of him knew this was just an attempt to feel like he was in control of a situation that he wasn't sure he wanted any part of.

Chapa was thinking about the murderers and rapists who shared the same secondhand air now snaking through his lungs, when the door leading to the rest of the prison squealed open and Grubb appeared. He was dressed in a bright orange jumpsuit, his expression as blank as a dead man's mind. The silver metal handcuffs that bound Grubb's wrists matched the frame of his wheelchair.

A heavy chain connected the cuffs to the thick shackles around the killer's ankles, even though Grubb's legs were useless to him. His pasty skin and sharp features were capped by jet black hair and underscored by a chin that looked like it had sliced its way down from the rest of his face.

Grubb invaded Chapa's personal space with a long stare that seemed

to have no origin or intent. Trying to stay cool, or at least create the impression that he was, Chapa reached for his pen without taking his eyes off Grubb, but came up empty and instead knocked one of them to the floor. Grubb's demeanor suddenly changed as a smile knifed across his waxy face and cut its way into that narrow space between Chapa's skin and everything that lay beneath.

ALSO BY HENRY PEREZ

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FLOATERS

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