

THE LAW GAME - BOOK ONE



REQUIEM FOR  
IMMORTALS

BY LEE WINTER

## PROLOGUE

To say Requiem felt nothing was incorrect. A common misconception about those in her line of work.

Disdain was not nothing.

She adjusted her black leather gloves, ensuring they sat snugly in each indent between her fingers.

Requiem circled the barren room. The concrete floor was lit by a dust-filtered arc of moonlight streaming through the cracked window. With a measured step, she moved to the centre and studied the timber walls, which were as wet as the floor. She crouched and placed a large box on the ground. From it, she removed a Chinese paper lantern. Some people called them wish lanterns. Her father had bought one for Requiem when she was a little girl. Together they had made a wish and watched it sail into the night sky, propelled by its naked flame until it disintegrated and fell back to earth in pieces.

This lantern was made of light white paper that encased a bamboo ring with a tiny fuel cell in the centre. A teepee of six long-burning incense sticks had been stuck to the bamboo frame, pointing toward the fuel cell.

Requiem lit the flame and checked that each incense stick was also ablaze. They contained a resin that gave off a unique aroma. As the lantern rose, she stepped back. It was beautiful. Like the perfect stillness of a lake at dawn or the soft curve of a woman's bare breast.

It bobbed against the dusty ceiling, casting an ominous glow over the room. After watching it for a moment, she turned and left, closing the door firmly behind her.

Requiem slid onto her motorcycle, a Kawasaki Ninja H2, and pulled her small, silver MP3 player from her vest pocket. She pressed play, verified on the screen that the volume was at exactly the level she desired, and then put the earbuds in. After she zipped up her leather jacket and slid on her helmet, she revved the engine and roared away.

The soul-cleansing strains of Arvo Pärt's *Fratres* (*String and Percussion*) played on.



Three days later, Melbourne's *Herald Sun* reported that a man, found in the hogtied position, had been burnt to death in a small room in an abandoned building. Squatters had stumbled upon his remains and alerted police.

The newspaper noted that, over the past seven weeks, the derelict industrial estate had been targeted by an arsonist who had set small, contained fires. So, on the night of the blaze, fire units had not responded to reports of another incident. They were unusually busy, and it was deemed a waste of resources.

Dental records determined that the deceased was a career criminal wanted for the torture and assault of the daughter of a Melbourne crime family boss, Carlo Trioli.

The Victorian Arson and Explosives Squad told the media they were initially baffled after discovering a small, melted, plastic substance in a room that had been doused in petrol. In addition to the petrol fumes, there was also a distinct smell they couldn't place.

*Herald Sun* police sources later identified the plastic as being from a fuel cell commonly used in wish lanterns.

"Someone clearly got their wish for this individual," a source said. "Investigations are continuing."

# CHAPTER 1

Natalya Tsvetnenko glanced around the packed concert hall, seeking one face among many. The July mid-year launch of the Victorian Philharmonic Orchestra's program was taking place on an unseasonably warm night and had attracted the who's who of Melbourne's cultural elite. And, much to her satisfaction, it had lured in a particular reclusive chemical entrepreneur.

Uli Busch was an enormous man. The CEO of a German corporation, BioChem Farming Solutions, used a polished silver cane to walk and wheezed with every step. His sway was exaggerated owing to two knee replacements and, so rumour had it, a once badly broken back.

Natalya drew her gaze back to her sheet music, listening intently for the end of the movement. She lifted her bow, placing it precisely, and drew a deep, guttural growl from her cello.

Four minutes, twelve seconds later, she paused as the lead violinist began her solo.

Her gaze drifted back to Busch's ruddy face.

One might think he would be an exceptionally easy target to erase from the mortal coil. Natalya knew better.

It wasn't that he rarely left his luxury yacht, which was moored in a different location each day. Natalya had a well-placed insider within Victoria's close-knit yachting fraternity. She already knew what he had for breakfast (nine sausages, four buttered Brötchen, and a black coffee), how often he washed his 4XL Y-fronts (not often enough), and which high-class escorts he preferred (Sasha on Fridays, random redheads on weekends).

No, it was his bodyguards—a quartet of mean-eyed ex-Mossad agents who had been so ruthlessly trained that everyone in her business gave them a wide berth. Facing just one of these vicious rottweilers would be testing. But four?

Well. She did enjoy a challenge. At least, her lethal alter ego certainly did.

Natalya had seen a lot of Busch over the years. The billionaire happened to be a devoted classical music fan. His collection of official live recordings was reputed to be the finest anywhere. Every major orchestra in the world had been graced with his imposing presence at least once every season.

His need for bodyguards had a lot to do with how Busch made his money. He liked to bulk-buy any pesticide outlawed by a country for next to nothing. Sometimes, instead of purchasing it, they would pay him to destroy it. Instead, he would on-sell it to Western countries which hadn't yet implemented the bans Europe had, or poorer nations susceptible to bribery.

When things got too hot, such as BioChem being linked to too many birth defects or farm worker deaths, he'd move on to the next unwitting nation, rinse, and repeat.

At the moment, Busch's obnoxiously named yacht, *Breakin' Wind*, was moored off Victoria, which meant he was busy selling his toxic wares to Australians. And that, in turn, explained why Requiem now had a wealthy Australian client with a farmer brother who was on life support after he'd tested BioChem's newest pesticide.

The client needed Busch to know exactly what his brother had endured. He had sought out Requiem because two previous assassins had met ends too grisly to be explained to their loved ones. The client had learned a valuable lesson about settling for less than the best.

She had already anticipated this and prepared accordingly.

Busch, Natalya knew, had a special fondness for Tchaikovsky, which was the Victorian Philharmonic's theme for its new season. A theme Natalya had casually suggested four months ago when she'd heard of the second assassin's failure.

If she'd been wrong about the client likely approaching her, it hardly mattered. She liked Tchaikovsky well enough to play him all season.

Natalya snatched glimpses of Busch in the VIP box throughout the rest of the concert, his beefy hand mopping his brow with a white handkerchief.

She rose with the rest of the orchestra as they duly marked their respect for the composer, taking in the ecstatic applause. Normally, Natalya would be on a

high from performing. Tonight, though, she was in a rare and uncomfortable position: she was mixing business with pleasure for the first time.

The question remained, which was the business, and which the pleasure?

In her twenty-four years of dual careers, she had never found an answer for that. Each had highs that were unmatched.

She packed up her cello, nodded to her colleagues who were buzzing about the after-party, and then asked the VPO's security guard to lock her instrument away for a few hours. She reached for a glossy, black handbag she'd prepared for the occasion. Natalya removed from it her MP3 player, pressed play, inserted the earpieces, and slowly walked the two blocks to the VIP after-party.

With each step, as Arvo Pärt emptied her mind, she shed Natalya Tsvetnenko and became Requiem. Her eyes focused. Her expression flattened out to neutral. Her mind replayed over and over what she had to do, sharpening, homing in on the most dangerous aspect—the last thirty seconds before Uli Busch would take his final breath.

She would kill one of the most protected men on earth in front of his vicious lapdogs, and no one would say a word. Busch would probably smile at her, never knowing he'd heard his last Tchaikovsky.

Pedestrians stepped away from Requiem as they neared her. She was peripherally aware of them but did not make eye contact. No better than cattle. Slow. Blinkered. Weak. Telegraphing their every move.

She did not even consider herself to be a member of the same species.

Calmness settled over her, and her movements became liquid as she smoothed out any errant thoughts.

A block from the venue, she stopped at a bench, removed her earphones, and sifted through her bag. She pulled out a small pearl ring from a protective box, and positioned it on her left, middle finger. Sliding the bag back over her shoulder, she resumed walking.

The after-party was taking place at Nova, a spacious, modern, inner-city nightclub, supposedly the hottest “it” spot in town this month. It was the closest place to the VPO that could easily handle the swell of 400 dignitaries expected tonight.

Nova was wedged between a kebab shop and an Italian restaurant and had a rabbit's warren of rarely used back alleys behind it. Only the street cleaners

knew where this tight tangle of back streets went, and few people ever had a need to use them.

At night, the darkened area was silent, save only for the faint rumble of traffic from the main road. Not so at Nova.

The theme inside the club was *Phantom of the Opera*, and Requiem had to admire the work that had gone into the decorations, even though it seemed a baffling choice for a Tchaikovsky season. She supposed the party planner's limited imagination on musical themes could only extend to the populist. Either that or a long-dead Russian composer was considered too uncool.

Ghostly white masks hung from fishing wire at different heights from the ceiling. Waitresses swished by with smoking cocktails as the music thumped around them. The venue's corners were as dark as tar, giving ready hiding places to those who might need them. She would have to be exceptionally careful.

Busch stuck to drinks supplied by his bodyguards. Wise. Especially given several assassins over the years had attempted to get to him through his food or drink. She sneered. How unoriginal. Far too easy to anticipate.

The German usually stayed at these things for four or five drinks, no more. Requiem picked her position and never took her gaze off his face. Waiting.

"Why, Natalya!" a perky voice said beside her. "What a lovely ring. I've never seen it before. Wherever did you get it?"

Requiem snapped her head around, schooling her features into a pleasant mask. Violinist Amanda Marks. Concertmaster of the VPO. High priestess of the social media crowd and adoring arts luvvies.

She glanced at her ring and back at Marks. "An associate," Requiem answered honestly. "Who wished me well." She shot her a thin smile.

"Oh." Amanda pouted. She probably hoped the story came with a salacious romance. The irritant opened her mouth to ask more, but Requiem had at last spotted her cue.

Busch grunted, muttered something to his closest bodyguard, and eased his thick jacket off his shoulders. Behind him stood a man with sharp eyes who took it.

Show time.

“Do you...” Amanda began.

Requiem waved towards her ear, feigning being unable to hear over the music, which had turned into some not-even-slightly-music techno mess.

She stalked away, letting the violinist get back to her adoring groupies who were far too old and immaculately dressed to be asking for selfies. Not that it stopped them. As she left them, her gaze fell on one woman in her early to mid-thirties with brown hair and fine features.

This one was watching everything with an awed expression, as though she didn't get out much. Since she was within the periphery of Marks's posse, the woman's judgment was clearly flawed. Suddenly, the mousy creature turned, and their eyes met. Then, equally suddenly, she smiled at Requiem. For no reason whatsoever.

Requiem paused in surprise. What had possessed the woman? Did she just randomly smile at strangers? Was this another of those maddening, socially expected female things?

Requiem dismissed her and strode onwards to her goal. She forced herself not to quicken her pace. She headed into a darkened area, lit only by a green fire escape “exit” sign.

Requiem looked around again. Nothing but a deserted, dead-end corridor vibrating faintly with the background bass thump of the (non) music from three rooms over.

Still in the filmy, long, black evening dress she had performed in, she dropped easily to a crouch. She turned her hand face up, rotated her “pearl” ring, and gently unscrewed the hollow bauble, leaving only a flat, round base with a tiny, threaded ridge.

In the centre, jutting up from this base, was the thinnest needle that money could buy—almost invisible to the human eye and no longer than two grains of rice. Such needle nibs were remarkably easy to acquire—one only needed to find a pharmacy selling diabetic supplies.

Taking a deep breath, she reached into her bag, opened a small vacuum-sealed container, and gently rolled a gel capsule onto the floor. It was the size of a pill, but its contents—a small amount of liquid—were anything but medicinal.



Requiem flipped her hand and lowered the tiny spike until it pierced the capsule's thin skin. She wiggled her hand slightly, ensuring the tip was liberally coated by the liquid within. She reached for the tweezers in her bag and with painful slowness pulled the gel pill from the wet needle tip. She dropped the tweezers and pearl bauble back into her bag.

Requiem rose, cautiously keeping her hand face down as though she were about to pat a dog. She kicked the gel pill into a gap in the old timber floorboards.

As she walked back to the party and made her way to her conductor, Anthony Lyman, she was careful to avoid any jostles. At least it looked like she was headed towards Lyman. As it happened, he was talking to Busch.

The sharp scent of the German's perspiration filled her senses. Four suspicious ex-Mossad agents snapped their gazes toward her to assess the possibility of threat. They relaxed when the conductor waved her over and introduced her as *his* "prodigiously talented cellist." He did this condescending routine over the VPO's women every time he had a VIP to impress.

For once, she didn't mind. It suited her purposes.

"Now, Natalya," Lyman continued, "have you met Mr Busch yet? Mr Busch, Natalya Tsvetnenko." The hopeful look in his eye told her he was desperate to bail on the man. Her nostrils twitched at his steep body odour, and she understood only too well Lyman's eagerness.

"No, we haven't met." She smiled and held out her hand to shake Busch's. "It's an honour."

"Well, I must mingle," Lyman said hastily and scuttled away. Requiem ignored him, focusing her entire being on this moment. Blood rushed in her ears, her heart thumped faster. She controlled her breathing, and a soothing coolness settled over her.

Busch shook her hand firmly, his sweating, meaty grip engulfing her fingers.

She smiled again, hiding her revulsion, and casually brought her left hand up under the fleshy forearm of the hand shaking hers, presidential style, and then pressed firmly.

The needle pushing into his flesh from her ring was so fine it was highly unlikely he felt it. She exhaled slowly as Busch merely smiled benevolently at her and started to talk.

“Your favourite composer,” Busch asked, pinning her with a stare. “Who is this? Why is he this?”

She carefully lowered both hands, acutely aware of the position of the lethal needle nib, and studied his white sleeve. There was about a thirty percent chance of a tell-tale pinprick of blood being left behind as the needle withdrew.

No red spot appeared.

“Arvo Pärt,” Requiem replied, satisfied. “A modern composer who fills the soul that is empty, and empties the soul that is full.”

He looked at her, clearly startled by her answer. She gave him another smile, mentally ticking away how many seconds the toxin had been pumping around his system, doing its damage. It was the most fast-acting poison known to man. It was completely natural, but unlike a snake or spider bite, there was no cure. A single drop could kill ten men.

Very soon, Uli Busch’s breathing would become impaired. A little after that, the mere act of inhaling would start to feel impossible.

By the time he fell to the floor, twitching in what might look like a seizure, his entire diaphragm would stop rising and falling with a paralysis that forced a person to hold his breath forever.

That’s when the terror would strike—and, if she calculated correctly, it would be exactly what a young farmer on a wheat station felt when he, too, discovered he could no longer draw breath. The panic at not knowing what was happening. The horror of wondering if this was his last moment. BioChem’s CEO was moments away from becoming intimately acquainted with his victims’ pain.

Busch turned, barking for his men to provide him more wine. He turned back, mouth opening, most likely to offer her a drink, but Requiem was already slipping away. Steadily she walked, ignoring the greetings of other orchestra members as she disappeared into the remote fire exit passage.

Requiem gingerly reattached the pearl bauble over the deadly needle, then slid the ring off, put it in the container, and sealed it. Under the light of

the neon green exit sign, she dropped it in her bag, and then rapidly dressed herself in the leathers, boots, and gloves she'd stashed in a dark corner here right before the concert.

She had tested the fire exit two nights ago for an alarm. There wasn't one. She eased the door open, slung her bag over her shoulder, and slipped out into the darkness.

Halfway down the fire escape, she heard the first shout for an ambulance. Good luck. Busch would be dead before it arrived; possibly before they even placed the call.

When they examined his body, they would see no entry wounds.

She navigated the twists and turns of the back alley to find her Ninja H2 waiting for her, crouched beneath a lone security light. The moths darting all around provided a mottled lighting effect to the area—nature's own mirror ball.

She'd planned ahead with her Ninja. If Busch's rottweilers actually got a clue, she would need a demon of a machine which topped 400 km/h. Even if they didn't catch on, Requiem, unlike Natalya, travelled no other way.

She stowed her bag in a small custom compartment at the rear of the motorbike, slid onto the seat, and settled. By rote, she reached for her MP3 player. Her maestro would strip any mess from her mind, tucking away unschooled thoughts like errant hairs behind an ear, and ground her.

As she lifted her helmet, she saw it. The faintest movement glinted in the shine of the helmet's glossy black paint. Requiem reacted instantly, diving from her bike and rolling away just as a figure in freefall dropped from a drainpipe and landed lightly a foot away.

How the hell had the rottweilers worked it out? This particular quartet's skills lay in torture and knife-work, not in grasping the complexities of a brilliantly conceived plan. Requiem was irritated that somehow she'd given herself away. She must have made a mistake somewhere. That did *not* happen.

At least there was only one of them to contend with. The other three were likely still trying to save their dying master.

She twisted away from the shadowy form just as it lunged at her, and Requiem kicked out blindly. Her foot connected, and she pushed back, the force of her powerful thigh flipping the attacker's body over. There was a startled "oomph" as he landed on his back and the air whooshed from his lungs.

Requiem threw herself onto the figure, and flipped her wrist up, positioning the base of her hand to break the attacker's nose and ram the bone fragments up into the brain. Just as she was about to strike, her attacker's head rolled to one side and light fell on the face. Short black hair, dark, narrow eyes, a flat nose, and curling, mean lips greeted her.

She stopped.

Mean, *sensuous* lips.

Her hand froze. Sonja bloody Kim. The best bodyguard of Ken Lee's gang, not to mention his enforcer and occasional assassin.

The Korean was lethal at close range and slippery as hell to pin down. She was a champion wrestler who had an ability to twist men's bones like pipe cleaners. And that was before you got to her skills with concealed weapons. She loved to play with kunai throwing knives.

"You!" Requiem spat. "Tell me you're not freelancing for Busch now?" She grabbed a fistful of Sonja's shirt, wrenched it up, and then slammed her head into the ground. "You do pick the bottom feeders."

"Says the great Requiem who has no loyalty to any family," Sonja shot back.

She bucked beneath Requiem who, despite being almost twice her size, struggled to contain her. In the middle of it all, Sonja inched her left hand toward her waistband.

"Why the hell can't the families stay in-house?" Sonja complained, scowling. Her hand suddenly flew to her waist but Requiem snatched it and pinned it by Sonja's ear.

As though her sneaky move hadn't just been interrupted, Sonja continued, "But no, they choose *you* for the dirtiest work. A freelancer! You, who'd kill any of them for the highest price. It's so stupid. They are weak!"

"They like my creative touch." Requiem smashed Sonja's head into the road again. "I send a message. Sometimes *all* they want is the message. But you? You're about as subtle as a two-by-four, with the brains to match."

She slipped her hand under Sonja's T-shirt, searching for whatever Sonja's fingers had been creeping towards, and pulled out the knife tucked in her waistband.

Requiem held it up to the light and examined it.

“How many others?” she asked, indicating the weapon.

Sonja shook her head, refusing to answer.

Requiem placed it at her throat. “How many others?”

“*Shi bai kepu seck yi!*”

“Even if I had an Oedipal complex, my mother is dead,” Requiem said coolly. “So no, I can’t.”

“You speak Korean?” Sonja started.

“Just the essentials,” Requiem said. “Last chance.” She scraped the edge of the knife lightly down Sonja’s jaw. The fine hairs on her cheek bent under the blade and then sprang up again. “How many more of these are you hiding? Or shall I strip you naked to find them?”

“Bite me.”

“You’d probably like that,” Requiem said. She offered a dangerous smile. She took the blade and slashed from the top of the T-shirt to the hem.

Pale brown skin, criss-crossed with scars, greeted her. She moved the knife to Sonja’s white sports bra and sliced it in one motion. Each half fell to the side.

Sonja stared up at her pugnaciously, but there was something odd about her expression.

Requiem considered Sonja for a moment, and then her gaze dropped. She took in the muscled, flat stomach, and slid her attention higher to soft mounds tipped with brown nipples, hardening in the night air.

“Like what you see?” Sonja asked, her voice teasing and provocative. Requiem didn’t bother to respond. Pleased as she was with the view, this was just business.

She returned the knife to Sonja’s throat and slid her other hand around and then shoved it under Sonja’s shredded T-shirt between her body and the road. Skidding her fingers over the imperfections of scars and softness in the spaces between, Requiem checked her back. She found nothing taped or hidden there. Then, she brought her hand around, slid it up to her skull, and expertly ran it through Sonja’s hair. Clean. Behind the ears was also nothing.

Requiem shifted her knife hand down to the jeans. The change in Requiem’s centre of gravity was all it took. No longer properly pinned down, despite

Requiem's weight across her hips, Sonja's hand shot out, grabbed Requiem's wrist, and jerked it back—hard. The knife flew into the distance and clattered against the road when it landed.

Sonja's left leg flew straight up behind Requiem, and the steel toe of her boot impacted the back of Requiem's head. Pain lanced through her. She fell forward, collapsing onto Sonja's chest, dazed. Sonja wrapped her legs around Requiem's waist, then moved her knees higher to her ribcage, and locked them in place. With a malicious glint in her eyes, she clapped her hands around Requiem's throat and squeezed.

"How smart are you now, huh?" Her breath dusted across Requiem's lips. "Stupid gae saeki."

Requiem, her brain still jangling, tried to shake off the vice-like grip around her ribs, but it only tightened. *Christ*. She should have known better. You *never* let Sonja Kim within wrestling distance. She'd simply been biding her time to strike.

Requiem's entire body creaked with the pressure, her breath shortening. It was like going up against an anaconda.

"Mr Lee heard there's a hit out for him," Sonja said, pulsing her thighs in crushing squeezes. "He knows they'll hire you to come for him. Consider this a pre-emptive strike."

The hands at her throat tightened. Requiem's consciousness flirted with the darkness, and she couldn't believe the power Sonja held in her compact body. Poor judgment on her part, clearly, as she knew Kim had once snapped a man's shin bone in two when he'd laughed at her diminutive stature.

Requiem wasn't laughing.

She tried shifting her arms, but they were firmly locked against her sides by Sonja's thighs. Requiem stared down into Sonja's eyes, black and piercing.

She was reminded of a vision from years ago. A man in a workshop, a wide-eyed little girl at his side.

She smiled at the memory, and Sonja blinked uncertainly.

"What the fuck are you smiling at? You'll be dead in seconds. The Great Requiem dead. The end!"

"Nabi," she said with dawning recognition.

The fingers at her throat slackened. “What?”

“I was just remembering the day we met. You as a girl. So adorable.”

The hands unclasped and fell to Requiem’s shoulders.

“At your father’s workshop,” Requiem continued, sucking in a lungful of air. “Carrying his tools while he maintained the Lee family’s equipment. Years ago. Before the Lees got into the flesh trade.”

Requiem smiled. “If I recall, Nabi means butterfly. Or kitten or something?”

Sonja flushed. “Fuck you.”

“You wish,” Requiem purred softly. “Don’t you?”

She recalled the young girl, barely in her teens, following her around for weeks when she’d first returned from Vienna after completing her cello scholarship at a top conservatorium. Natalya had been what? Nineteen? Twenty?

Some of Lee’s associates had sponsored her after one of their ambitious wives had taken an interest in the young Natalya—in both her prodigious talent and the possibilities she presented.

Natalya had been doing the rounds, thanking the appropriate men. They, in turn, expected her to fulfil her end of the bargain. Shortly afterwards, she resumed her secret tutelage for an apprenticeship of a most unusual kind.

Requiem’s weapons training over the next few years had been unmatched, which wasn’t surprising because Lee’s weapons expert, Dimitri, was the best there had ever been.

This had been before the crime family wars, before Dimitri had left to create a rival house and everything had gone to hell. And in this relatively peaceful window of her life, a Korean girl, eyes wide with adoration, had followed Requiem everywhere.

“My shadow,” Requiem said, slowly. “I called you my shadow.”

“I’m not her anymore.” Sonja’s eyes flared.

“Aren’t you?” Requiem taunted. She leaned closer. “You did what you said you would do. Do you remember?”

“No.” Sonja’s face turned darker. The lie was obvious. Her legs, finally, began to loosen around Requiem’s ribs.

“You said you wanted to be just like me.” Requiem chuckled. “And look at you now. A killer, a lethal body for hire.”

Sonja looked at her, clearly confused by this turn of conversation.

"I'm curious, Nabi, why you chose to jump me here. There are much more private places. My own home, for instance. Your boss knows exactly where I live. But no—here we are, in a dark alley, in public. How *curious*."

"Not curious. Convenient." Sonja looked away.

"I have never seen anyone better at knives than you, Nabi, not in all my life. Not even Popov," she continued conversationally, "and that man was a master of the blade." Requiem leaned forward. "So, my question is, why am I not lying in that gutter with your gleaming little ninja knives poking out of my back already?"

"In the back? That's such bullshit. I'm no coward."

"Or my front, then?"

Sonja glared at her but had no answer.

"Anyone would think you, or at least a part of you, are desperately hoping to be interrupted by choosing a city street. The problem is, you don't know what I do. You don't know how deserted this particular area is."

"You're making no sense."

"No? Because I think, deep down, you don't actually want to kill me at all. After all, it's hard to kill a woman you're in love with."

The slap came lightning fast, but Requiem had slithered an arm free and was prepared. She caught Sonja's hand and then forced the arm back to the ground.

She leaned forward until her lips were in line with Sonja's, inches apart. "Am I really wrong?"

She noted dispassionately the quickening rise and fall in Sonja's breathing. She smiled. Oh, Requiem knew arousal when she saw it. Her own pulse picked up at the promise of what lay ahead. Of showing Sonja that she didn't rule the game, that the game was Requiem's, balanced eternally in her favour.

A part of her was vastly irritated at how close she'd come to being throttled at the hands of this slip of a woman. She grabbed Sonja's other hand and angrily slapped that into the ground, too, and shot her a glare.

For Requiem, the sex act itself held little appeal. It was hot and sweaty and chaotic and left a mess. Worse, she lost control at one pivotal moment, no



matter how hard she tried to maintain it. But power? Requiem was addicted to its sweet taste. It was a high that had no peer, so she would tolerate one to indulge in the other. Even if it involved a public alley and— she wrinkled her nose in distaste—*dirt*.

“A fucking lie!” Sonja spat in protest. “Kuh-juh!”

Requiem lowered her head until it was just inches above Sonja’s. “Is it a lie?” she goaded. She released one wrist and ran a fingertip over a nipple, circling it until it puckered into a hard knot.

A blush rose on Sonja’s cheeks, and her eyes narrowed into a glower. Requiem gave a low laugh.

“So conflicted. You want to tell me to fuck off, but you’re so aroused at the thought that I might finally give you what you’ve always wanted—what poor little *Nabi* wanted—that you can barely see straight.”

Requiem rolled her hips against her, and Sonja’s crushing grip fell away completely. Requiem’s diaphragm gratefully expanded properly for the first time in seven minutes. Her relief was enormous.

She should probably kill Sonja now. Or flee. Or both. But she wasn’t going to miss this opportunity. No, no. It comes along so rarely, the chance to show another person who really holds the power. The chance to crush the pitiful idea that Sonja had any control at all when playing in Requiem’s arena was truly delicious. Teach this lesson right the first time, and it would last a lifetime.

Sonja was about to become an apt pupil. She would walk away tonight and never again doubt who was in charge.

“You’ve wanted me for how long?” Requiem demanded, lips curling.

Sonja gritted her teeth.

“No need to be shy. Tell me, and I might even let you have a taste.” She gave her a lingering, dark look filled with every illicit promise.

A tremor ran through Sonja’s body, and Requiem offered a knowing smile. Then she struck, her teeth latching onto Sonja’s neck, biting hard. To her satisfaction, Sonja actually mewed. Requiem pulled back and laughed that Sonja looked appalled by her own response.

“Oh my dear, little *Nabi*, you liked that. Didn’t you?” Requiem taunted.

Sonja scowled and shook her head.

“I don’t believe you,” Requiem said. “Last chance—nod for me if you want this, or I’ll just stop right now and leave you all hot and bothered.”

Sonja glared at her, but there was hunger in her eyes. Slowly, with a reluctant jerking motion as if it physically pained her, Sonja gave the smallest of nods. A heady rush of power surged through Requiem, and she smiled triumphantly.

She bent over Sonja and latched onto a plump brown nipple, viciously attacking it. Sonja squirmed beneath her. Knowing her strength when it was unleashed excited Requiem all the more.

Something clawed at Requiem’s pants. She looked down to discover Sonja’s hand worming its way up her leathers, towards her centre. She growled, snatched it back, and flattened Sonja’s wrist to the ground. “You want to play with me, you want *me* to allow this, then you play my way.”

Sonja tossed her an irritated look but complied. Moments later, Requiem unbuttoned Sonja’s jeans, shoved her gloved hand inside, and pushed past the flimsy cotton to find a slickness. She rubbed fiercely as Sonja wriggled and gasped.

Requiem paused, looked her directly in the eye, and positioned her gloved fingers at Sonja’s entrance. In the strange, dappled light, she wondered what this looked like, this frantic coupling of a towering woman engulfing her smaller, willing prey.

She entered her with two fingers and no preamble, and Sonja issued a low moan, followed by a string of Korean too fast for Requiem to decipher. It didn’t need much translation. Sonja’s heat warmed her sleek black gloves, and the sticky, obscene sounds of their meeting filled the night air.

Sonja’s gasps were choked but loud enough to draw attention. Requiem slammed her hand over her mouth. “Shut up,” she demanded.

Sonja viciously bit her glove, and Requiem snarled, jerking her hand away. She grabbed a handful of hair, tugging her head back roughly. That exposed Sonja’s neck, and she couldn’t resist. Requiem made short work of claiming it with her teeth, scraping, then licking to ease the pain, and then nipping and biting once more. Sonja cried out as she undulated against her.

Requiem pulled her hand out of the pants, rolled back onto her haunches, and in one powerful move, yanked down Sonja's jeans and underwear until they were at her knees.

This was exactly where she wanted her. Unable to move, unable to attack, bare and exposed to Requiem's gaze.

Requiem studied her as one might consider a specimen under glass. Sonja's hairless lower lips, delicate, pink, and swollen, were wet with arousal. Sonja shivered before her. In anticipation or cold, Requiem couldn't say.

"Such a lovely body, little Nabi," she purred. She traced several scrapes and nicks on her torso and thighs with her fingers. "Love bites from our colleagues, I see," she said. "How thoughtful of them to leave souvenirs."

Sonja smirked. "I left worse on them. Those still walking, anyway."

"I have no doubt," Requiem agreed with an amused smile and continued her slow journey south, her finger slipping lower until it found her slit once more. She dipped into the wetness, running up and down, then lifted her slippery leather-clad finger higher. She rolled the protruding clit in a circle. Sonja made an excited gasp, so Requiem focused on the exposed little protrusion, teasing, twirling, rolling.

"You want this, don't you," Requiem said with a purr. "Me, fucking you? How long have you thought about it? How long have you wanted me? Tell me."

Sonja moaned. Requiem flicked her clit hard. Sonja gave a small, startled grunt of pain, so Requiem did it again and was satisfied to achieve the same result.

"You get off on this," Requiem said in a low voice. "The danger. The killing's just incidental for you, isn't it? The excitement comes from everything else. The build-up..." She pulled her fingers away from her clit, slid them down her swollen lips, pleased at Sonja's soft whimper of regret at the loss of sensation. She rammed her fingers deep inside her, three this time.

"The build-up beforehand and the high after the pay-off," Requiem pumped again, "that's what turns you on. Danger and thrills. Not the kills."

She listened to the noise, the slippery, sucking noise of leather pushing in and out of soaked flesh. "But what you love is *this*, with me," she continued, slamming her fingers in harder, "most of all."

A whimper was her answer.

“No comment?” Requiem lifted her eyebrow and looked up to study Sonja’s upturned face, flushed red, eyes blinking into the night. “If I sat on your face, if I made you lick me, would you like that? Little Nabi finally gets her tongue on the great Requiem’s *cunt*.”

Sonja whimpered at the deliberately provocative word, and her head rolled listlessly to one side, her breath coming in pants. Requiem withdrew her sopping fingers and gave her clit another powerful flick. “Well?”

“Screw you.” Sonja gasped. The words seemed wrenched from her.

“Not unless I allow it.” Requiem sneered. A siren wailed in the distance. “Not long now.”

She thumbed Sonja’s clit in circles, smirking as it twitched, begging for more. Sonja made a low keening noise.

“Say it,” Requiem ordered. “You’ve wanted me since?”

“Fuck off.” Then came another stream of Korean. This time, she recognised more than a few words, each worse than the last.

“No need to be crass. I might just leave you like this if you don’t choose your words better.”

She pulled her hand away, wiping her essence down Sonja’s bare thighs. Then she leaned forward, mouth just over her prey’s. “You want me,” she told Sonja cockily, looking her in the eye. “Desperately. You always have. And that is not a lie.”

Sonja reared up until her lips brushed against Requiem’s mouth. Requiem snapped her head away in distaste. “No kissing,” she snapped. “I’m not your fucking girlfriend.”

“Requiem,” Sonja moaned. “I...please.”

“Better.” Requiem rewarded her by moving back to hip level and watching her closely. She bent just above Sonja’s clit. “How long have you wanted me? Mmm?” she murmured over the heated skin.

Sonja hesitated. Requiem tapped her clit with her tongue. “Since before Dimitri left Lee’s crew?”

Sonja nodded, and Requiem rewarded her with another quick flick of her tongue over her clit. Sonja’s thighs trembled, and she reached for Requiem’s hair.

Requiem slapped her hands away. “No.”

The ambulance’s wail grew louder.

“Answer me! Since when?”

“The day you started training at Mr Lee’s.”

Requiem looked at her triumphantly. “So—it turns out I didn’t lie, then.”

“No,” Sonja said, her voice defeated. Ragged. She didn’t even bother to curse her existence this time.

“No,” Requiem agreed and covered her cunt with the flat of her tongue, luxuriating in the creamy, piquant taste, lavishing the skin with her warmth and leaving shining wet trails. Her tongue’s rough flesh slipped over the clit, swirling and jabbing.

Sonja squeezed her eyes shut, started to speak, then gasped, shrieked and came. Hard. Requiem lapped up her essence, then pulsed her tongue inside her. Sonja’s thighs trembled anew.

Requiem rose up on her haunches.

Sonja looked at her. “My turn,” she said quickly, almost fearfully. And there was so much desire in those eyes that Requiem had to glance away. First loves were a powerful thing. Hell, she knew all about that.

“You promised,” Sonja added. She seemed ashamed of her neediness and bit her lip. Requiem experienced the same surge of power she’d felt the moment she realised she could teach this one a lesson about the game.

Requiem stood fluidly, walked over Sonja to plant a boot on either side of her ribs, and stared down at her. “Eager, are we?” she said. “Well, it’s true; I did promise.”

She paused there for a moment, cocking her head as she listened to the wail of the ambulance growing incrementally louder. Then she glanced back down again, to take in the eagerness in Sonja’s glazed eyes as she watched her.

She unbuckled the belt on her leather pants and, aching slowly, slid them down her muscled legs. Sonja stared, unblinking, as though memorising every detail.

When Requiem reached just above her ankles, she ran her hands back up her legs. They were mainly smooth with only two scars—one from a stray bullet; the other a knife that missed its mark. Her thighs were powerful, and

she was aware enough to know she was a remarkable specimen of her gender. It wasn't vanity. Simply a fact to be exploited when necessary.

Sonja's irises grew wide with desire, and pride welled within Natalya.

"Impatient?" she teased her as she trailed a finger over her own mound, over her underwear. She smiled at the frustrated growl.

Requiem hooked her thumbs in black cotton—tight, practical, boy-cut panties—and slid them down her legs. And then she stood, hands on hips, like a goddess. Sonja absorbed her so intently that she seemed to have forgotten how to breathe.

Sonja's nipples had grown erect again, and her breathing had begun to deepen.

"Oh god," Sonja whispered so softly that Requiem almost missed it. "*Neh...*"

Slowly, Requiem knelt, one knee to either side of Sonja's head, one ankle over each shoulder, and the straining stretch of her leather pants now pressed into Sonja's chest. Requiem bent forward, scooped the back of Sonja's head in one hand, and without a word, pushed her mouth into her folds.

"As promised," she said. "You have five minutes. I need to be gone before that ambulance arrives. Impress me."

She leaned back slightly and watched as Sonja eagerly went to work, sliding her tongue over her slit, slipping in and out, scraping the clit. She had some talent; Requiem had to give her that. Her muscles turned to liquid, and then came the tell-tale twitch in her cunt that said someone was doing something very right to it.

Requiem held her firmly against her neatly trimmed mound, not giving an inch. She knew her face would appear the picture of control. She reminded herself who she was. Who was receiving the lessons. Whose game this was. Who always won.

Her nostrils twitched, though, when that tongue tapped her in *exactly* the right place. Her thighs quivered with the effort of holding her position, and her bare knees drilled painfully into the dirt.

Sonja found her wellspring. Requiem was completely soaked from this display of submission from the second-best assassin she'd ever known.

“Clean it up,” she ordered, her voice strained as the tongue stroked and plundered her. “That’s it.” She tugged Sonja’s head tighter to her and, much to her chagrin, groaned when Sonja’s tongue performed a sublime little pirouette that made her want to fuck her properly. In a bed. For a week.

But that wasn’t who Requiem was. Or Natalya, for that matter.

The siren’s wail was much closer now. It had to be only a couple of blocks away.

“Time’s up,” she ground out. The frenzied lashing increased, and her clit ached to come. *So close.* The power and adrenalin surged through her. Sonja was trembling, too. Requiem realised the other woman was close to coming again.

Well, Requiem smirked, Sonja was tasting an immortal. Who could blame her?

Sonja’s tongue froze mid-stroke, her body shaking, and she made a strangled noise at the back of her throat. Requiem exhaled, lowered Sonja’s head to the ground, and rose, unsated physically, but emotionally feeling like a god.

She looked down at herself. Her sex dripped in the faint light, moisture from her arousal clinging to the tiny hairs. She stood stock still for a second, allowing the night air to hit her. The coolness washing over her furnace was heady. She gave herself a brief rub over her clit, enjoying the sensation as it sat up in delight, purring. Had she been alone, she might have allowed herself to come right then.

Instead she cleared her throat. “Close but no cigar,” she told Sonja. She pulled her underwear and leathers back up her thighs quickly, watching the disappointment on Sonja’s face.

“Was it everything you dreamed of?” Requiem taunted as she rebelted her pants. She walked languidly over to her Ninja, found her discarded MP3 player and helmet, then slid onto its seat, unable to resist rubbing herself against the smooth, hard surface. An electric frisson shot straight to her centre.

Christ, she was close.

“Did I live up to your teenage fantasies? Was it the same as when you fucked yourself under the sheets every school night?”

Sonja's chest rose and fell swiftly. Even from this distance, her embarrassed flush was visible in the low light.

"I'll take your two orgasms as a yes. I, however, remain less impressed." She slid her helmet on, flicked up the visor, and studied her. "Oh, but you can tell your boss that he's right. Ken Lee is on my dance card in the near future. I have a very special exit planned for the man who sells the bodies of innocent young girls."

She gave her a cool, twisted smile. "It's quite shocking really."

Sonja scowled, sitting up. She couldn't go anywhere with her pants in a twisted mess and she'd apparently just remembered her main mission.

"Fuck!" she said, scrabbling at her jeans.

Requiem watched, revving her bike as a pointed reminder that she was now too far away for Sonja to stop her.

"I believe I already did." Requiem let her gaze linger over the half-naked form. "You're welcome," she said with a cruel smile. "Oh, my little Nabi, look what you let me do to you when you should have been killing me. You're a *terrible* assassin."

Requiem gave her bike another rev and pulled away with a roar of the engine. She didn't look back.

She passed an ambulance screeching to a stop outside the nightclub. A crowd of onlookers stood on the footpath, including many of her colleagues and several agitated bodyguards who were gesturing frantically to the emergency vehicle.

She focused on the cleansing sounds of Arvo Pärt as it filtered into her brain, drowning out the chaos. The thrum of her black beast vibrated between her legs.

Well, she'd had worse nights. A lot worse.

Requiem smiled.



## CHAPTER 2

### Three months later

Natalya woke precisely at 5:15am. She carried out her morning routine efficiently, made her bed with military corners and then dressed in black leggings and a form-fitting sports T-shirt.

She made a quick tour of her home, checking positions of locks as she went. Then she turned on her computer's security bot program and set it to run through overnight camera footage and look for anomalies. It would beep if anything was amiss.

From the street, her residence might be dismissed as an old warehouse, hidden behind twelve-foot high brick walls. Only the roofline was visible to passersby.

Natalya padded down to her indoor gym and stepped onto the treadmill. For a moment she stopped and stared out of the floor-to-ceiling window at the strip of dismal grey sky above the riot of vines scribbling across the wall that encircled her property. She gave her head a shake and began her usual seven kilometre run.

She increased her pace quickly and began her mental exercise of tuning out distractions. She was a rock. Powerful. Solid. She controlled her world. The world didn't control her. Her feet pounded like a metronome, ticking away in her brain: *One-four, two-four, three-four, four-four, inhale, exhale. Repeat.*

Precisely thirty minutes later, she stepped off the machine, breathing more heavily but not hard. She shook out a neatly folded towel from the stack next to her equipment and mopped up her perspiration. She began to stretch her arms and shoulders in preparation for her weight-training session, which would be followed by an hour of yoga. A faint beep sounded in the distance. She paused to listen. A rapid series of beeps followed.

Her alarm. Her home's security system included cameras and movement sensors to go with the coiled barbed-wire and the poisonous, prickly climbers running along the top of her walls. No intruder could get far without detection—or pain. Because, if they made it over the wall, an array of thorned plants and a tight row of *Hippomane mancinella* trees would cause a most painful reaction.

She jogged to the lounge, opened the sliding glass door, and stared out over her property. Sergei Duggan was attempting to cross her lawn. *Attempting* being the operative word. She lowered herself onto her travertine bench, crossed her legs at the ankle, and watched as the renowned killer's skin reacted violently to her aptly named “little apple of death” trees.

It was pathetic, really, a big strong man like this reduced to his knees by flora. It was almost educational. She flicked invisible lint off her leggings as he floundered before her, a fleshy sack of human failings.

He grimaced in pain, rubbed anxiously at his blistering skin, and cursed furiously. He looked at her, his dark eyes filled with an anguished plea he was too proud to utter.

It would be pointless anyway. What did he expect her to do? Save his slimy neck?

As he convulsed, his hidden garrotte slithered from his sleeve. Natalya watched impassively as the life faded from his eyes.

*This* had been one of the world's top assassins? Natalya sniffed. Please. He hadn't even gotten as far as her water feature.

This so-called professional hadn't done his homework and had met a predictable end. Research was everything.

She sighed in irritation. Now she'd have to organise a clean-up. She could do it herself, of course, but the benefits of being the best in her field meant she could delegate any wet work—and the risks of being caught during body disposal—to one of her associate's underlings.

Flicking the towel over her shoulder, Natalya gave Duggan a parting look, aggrieved that he'd thrown her off her routine and ruined her workout. She headed for the shower.

Natalya turned the music player on just outside the bathroom and flicked through the selections until she came to *Lacrimosa* from Mozart's *Requiem*.

She shifted the volume precisely four turns, waiting for the strains to begin. Then she entered the polished granite bathroom.

Natalya shed her workout clothes, filed them neatly in her laundry hamper, and turned the cold tap on full. She stepped into the biting spray and counted to thirty. The mark of discipline was to withstand that which the body said it could not. Like making a cello weep, it was necessary to hold the trembling notes a little past what made the listener comfortable. But if one held it, quivering until the limits were reached, then exceeded...the payoff was always worth it.

At thirty seconds, she flicked the water to hot and reached for her liquid soap. She took careful stock of her pale body where wounds were apt to stand out. It wasn't vanity. Too often, injuries were overlooked in the rush of adrenalin.

With her fingers lathered with suds, she started at her collarbone, skidded past a bruise, and then sank lower, to her breasts. A faint white line ran perpendicular down the left breast—courtesy of a close call with a Serbian who had Mafia ties. He was as mad as a heat-stroked poodle, but by god, the man was skilled with his knives. He should be—he was a Michelin star restaurant chef.

She dropped her fingers to her ribs and methodically counted nine imperfections with her fingers. She sought out every pockmarked scar and automatically catalogued the details of each—days, places, faces. Cool men. Insane men. Cunning men. Angry men.

And one woman.

The large purple bruise on her hip was still healing from that vicious encounter. She pushed her fingers into it and hissed at the resulting jolt of pain.

Three months back, she'd promised Sonja she'd take down her boss, Ken Lee. He was a hard man to gain access to, but nine days ago she'd finally made good on her vow and caught him with his pants down. Literally.

The demise of the man who ran the world's largest prostitution ring and trafficked pre-teen girls from South-East Asia was about as fitting as it got. Natalya had quite enjoyed electrifying the small metal grid she'd connected to the base of Lee's private urinal at his favourite gentleman's club. The crack of

lethal energy shot up the first natural conductor it found—which, in this case, was salt. From Lee's urine.

Sonja had been less inclined to appreciate the artistic merit of her boss's shocking exit. Everyone's a critic.

It wasn't like Natalya hadn't expected some retaliation, so she hadn't been too startled when Sonja had jumped her yesterday and left her mark.

Natalya's hip twinged again as she rubbed her soapy hand across the bruise. Of course, Sonja had more reasons to be furious with her, thanks to their little tryst all those months ago, but that wasn't what this was about. As a professional, Sonja had an obligation to extract payback on behalf of her crime family. She'd severely lost face over Lee's humiliating assassination.

It was an occupational hazard, dodging her own kind. The professionals who came for her—usually hired by clients who might have lost a favoured associate in one of her hits—were especially dedicated to seeing that she was “punished.”

Good luck with that.

She had lived longer than most in her profession. She had done so by demanding perfection of herself. Taking pride in her work. Being disciplined. Faultless in her planning. Meticulous in her attention to detail. It served her in both her careers. And so, at age forty-one, the assassin known as Requiem continued to live, while others twitched and drooled on her manicured lawn, making her motion sensors light up like a Christmas tree.

Natalya drew herself out of her reverie and shampooed her hair. It was long and glossy, sitting well below her shoulder blades. It was her only indulgence, her sole vanity. Once done, Natalya turned off the tap and towelled down.

She slid on her silk robe and slippers and padded out into the lounge, still drying her hair with a fluffy white towel. She headed for her fish tanks. One held a dozen small goldfish. The second, a cone snail—a beautifully coloured orange and white-shelled *Conus geographus*. She had carefully harvested it specifically for its unique properties during a dive off Ningaloo Reef.

Beside the tank, perfectly aligned, lay a pair of forceps and a row of test tubes. She slung her towel over her shoulder and used a small fish net to scoop up a goldfish and plop it into the cone snail's tank. With a detached

fascination, she watched as the lethal marine creature's sting shocked its prey into paralysis. Within seconds the goldfish was dead.

Satisfied, she headed over to her pride and joy.

In a small pot by the lounge window sat a single, vivid purple flower—her favourite. An African violet, *Saintapaulia ionantha*. Preferring no moisture on the leaves, African violets had to be watered from the bottom. They did not enjoy anything on the surface at all, including dust, water, and grime. With such pristine requirements, it was little wonder Natalya's African violet always thrived.

She gave it sixty millilitres of tepid, filtered water, dusted the leaves, and then moved over to her phone. She had a situation to remedy on her front lawn.

She pressed a speed-dial number, listened to an odd assortment of computerised clicks and beeps, and then heard a male voice say: "Yes?"

"I have a package that needs urgent collection."

"Where?"

"Home."

"Just the one?"

"Yes."

"One hour."

She hung up and then pressed play on her phone messages.

*Voice message received, 11:38pm, Friday. Ms Tsvetnenko, it's Mesut Schulz, from the Berliner Philharmoniker. Our cellist Milena Lomas is ill. We understand you are already going to be in Europe next month. So we wanted to know if you're available for depping on the French leg of our world tour? Moscow Symphony Orchestra gives you an excellent reference from their 2013 tour. You'd be needed in Paris in a little over three weeks for rehearsals. My assistant will make all the visa arrangements and so forth. Please call her.*

*Voice message received, today, 9:03am. Hello, ah, Ms Tsweetnarcko, it's Kylie Payne from Classical Notes. We have managed to source that rare sheet music for Carl Reinecke's Cello Concerto in D minor, Opus Eighty-two. Took some doing, but it's in. We're open 'til five.*

There was a clunk and a mechanical whirr that went along with accessing her second, encoded line. She'd hired a man who used to be employed by the KGB for hacking dissidents' telecommunications. He had secured her phones from every conceivable law-enforcement agency surveillance tap. Even he couldn't crack her devices now, he'd told her with enormous pride before dropping a bill the size of a third-world country's debt in her lap.

*Voice message received, today, 6:13am. Well, well, Req, you picked it. Mr S came crawling back and rolled over. He's paying full tote. Check your secured email for the new packet for his job. Oh, and we've had a reply from that mystery client. I explained the protocol, that we need to know who we're working for, but instead of answers they paid double on the condition we don't ask questions and don't dig into it. Still can't trace their origins, but it came through the usual gang of four's contacts, so I've approved it.*

The gang of four were Requiem's main source of business. This destructive quartet of Melbourne clans and their allies had divvied up most of Victoria's criminal enterprises between them. The Trioli family, for instance, ran all the fixed racing games in town.

The late Ken Lee had run Moonlight Crew, which was formerly an armaments importation ring and now brought in underage girls from poor rural areas in South-East Asia and sold them to illegal brothels.

Fleet Crew was formed when weapons expert Dimitri Kozlovsky left Ken Lee to set up his own empire. No one outside of the gang knew who Fleet's kingpin was since Kozlovsky's death in 2002. The crew worked illegal guns and ammo, and ran professional armed robberies.

The High Street boys, headed by Mr S—aka Santos—specialised in the manufacture and Australian-wide distribution of ice, or crystal meth.

The various gangs did not play well together and, since 1998, had a nasty habit of killing key members of other families. These murders ran almost unchecked because the police were more interested in focusing on crimes the public cared about. Criminals eating their own was a low priority.

It was a mystery how the feud between the families had started, and each side blamed the other. No one knew what the trigger had been except Requiem. And one other.

Natalya folded her towel and tuned back into her associate's conversation.

*I've sent you that mystery client's packet, too. The individual you'll be visiting is... uh... unusual. You'll see. I know that curious brain of yours will love profiling her.*

*Anyway, that job comes with a couple of stipulations. Make the visit up close and personal so they know what's what. Don't do the job at their home or that of their family. And you have to wait three weeks before you do the work and not a second sooner. Oh and—*

The message ended abruptly as it ran out of allocated space. Her associate always did ramble on.

Three weeks? Natalya's eyebrow lifted. Why the delay? Life insurance papers? Pushing for a new will?

Natalya reached for her mobile phone and flicked to her email. A decrypted document appeared, and she tapped in a 10-digit password as her landline kicked in again.

*Voice message received, today, 6:16am. I just wanted to say good job on Ken Lee. That can't have been easy, her associate continued as though there had been no interruption. Oh and I've finally seen the paper. You did take that earlier brief literally, didn't you? That client is so happy with your particular brand of wish fulfilment for his little girl that he wants to name his next kid after you. How does that grab you?*

Natalya pressed her lips together in a disapproving line. *Requiem Trioli?* No, it did not grab her in the slightest.

The phone message ended, and her gaze fell on the document she'd downloaded. Natalya studied the brief, then tapped the candid photo accompanying the packet to enlarge it.

Wide blue eyes stared back at her. Pale skin, brown, shoulder-length hair. Small, compact frame. Something about that face niggled at the back of her brain.

The photo had been taken as the woman walked in a city park, juggling a handbag, water bottle, and sandwich bag. She broadcasted helplessness.

*This* was the woman someone needed a professional to eradicate?

She frowned and scoured the rest of the document. No information on who ordered the hit. No clue as to what this tiny mouse of a creature had done to merit a hired killer.

Blackmailer, maybe? Informant?

She scrolled back to the photo. The woman's body language set her teeth on edge. Why did women persist in trying to take up less space than they needed? She should take what was hers, not shrink from her own shadow.

Natalya's father, a military man, had taught her to claim her space. He'd taught her how to stand tall, shake hands firmly, look people in the eye, and stake her place in the world, unflinching and unapologetic. Women, like men, had to demand to be counted.

This woman's shoulders were hunched, arms pressed against her sides even as she tried to juggle her various possessions. She was far too fragile to be a target that required a professional hit. A stiff breeze would blow her over.

Something really didn't smell right. The job was too easy. She didn't like easy any more than she liked a mystery her clever mind could not solve.

She scanned the data once more.

**Name:** Alison Ryan

**Age:** 34

**Employment:** Government worker, Solomon Lewis Building.

Consult Addendum A for map.

**Hobbies:** Classical music.

**Spouse/Partner:** None.

**Pets:** None.

**Living arrangements:** 9 Benong Court, Frankston.

Cohabits with elderly mother who has health and mobility issues.

Natalya considered the address. Frankston was an outer Melbourne suburb with a working-class reputation. It was also a world beneath the wealth of her usual clientele.



She returned her attention to the photo and studied the woman's face again.

What had she done? And who had she done it to?

The client who had paid double for the kill could be a jealous lover, she supposed, although Requiem's specialty and six-figure fee should have automatically precluded such a low-brow client. Her expertise was in gangland killings, and anybody with the connections to hire her knew that.

As for a clause demanding no questions? Double payment or not, she didn't operate that way. She tapped in a number she knew by heart and waited for it to ring twice. Then she hung up and repeated the process.

Her phone rang five seconds later, and tell-tale electronic pops and beeps sounded at the other end.

"Req?" The Hacker's voice was more mechanical than human, thanks to all the filters and security he'd put in place.

"I need a new look-up," she replied without preamble. "Name's Alison Ryan. She works in the Solomon Lewis building in the CBD. I need to know exactly what she does for a living. Career highlights."

"Solomon Lewis? Okay, could be anything—you know how many departments are wedged in there right now?"

"I know. Can you do it quickly?"

The Hacker's tinny laughter was his only response.

"Okay," Natalya said, pleased. "And be discreet. I don't want her to know she has a shadow."

"Always." The phone went dead.

The Hacker was most famous for his industrial espionage, and there wasn't a database he hadn't been able to infiltrate. She pictured her associate's furious glare given this was supposed to be a don't-ask, don't-tell job—but then again, her associate's neck wasn't the one on the damn line.

Natalya consulted her phone's calendar. She could take care of this job and the Paris leg of the Berlin orchestra tour. And she could probably even throw in the Santos target before she left as well.

Viktor Raven. She sneered. Well that was the name he was going by these days. She'd known him when he was Joe Hastings from Dandenong. The

cowardly slug of an informant had finally done something to upset Santos to the point of homicide, and he was well aware he had a mark on his head. Rumour had it, he'd hired a top-drawer private bodyguard, someone very hard to kill.

Well, that should make life interesting.

She tapped open her work calendar and entered a few coded notes: Watch the little mouse, find and eradicate the slug, roast said mouse, then head to Paris.

Sorted, she strode to her timber-floored rehearsal room and opened her cello case. She eased into the seat, rubbing the ridges on the thumb of her left hand. No matter how much she practised easing her grip, still they remained.

She closed her eyes, positioned the rare Charles Adolphe Maucotel instrument, and began to play. Music washed away everything. It was her greatest love. Her soul ripped itself apart and restitched itself anew. Becoming immortal, she called it. Her ability to die and be reborn every time she touched her cello.

Hunger drove her, four hours later, to lift her gaze from the possession she loved most. She eased her instrument regretfully away from her, wondering at the mere mortals who never felt what she did. Those who experienced music on the periphery, who heard it as pleasant sounds rather than felt it resonate with every fibre of their being.

She froze, the bow sagging in her hand. *That's* where she knew her latest target from. She'd seen this woman at a Victorian Philharmonic Orchestra season launch party three months ago. The night of the Uli Busch hit, if she wasn't mistaken.

Natalya never forgot a face. The little mouse had been among the fawning groupies for Amanda Marks. Marks, in her flowing black gown, with perky, elfin features, had an ego almost as sizeable as her adoring fan base.

Violinists, Natalya snorted. Always the rock stars.

Not that Natalya particularly cared. She was more interested in fading into the background and not being bothered by the unwashed masses with their cloying demands for autographs and photos.

She packed away her cello and began her mental list of how to proceed next. She had three weeks. Plenty of time to learn all she needed to about Alison Ryan and the most optimum method for doing what had to be done.

Even so, her mind kept darting back to the woman's face. She realised, as she visualised it, that one word above all others kept rising to the fore—Innocent.

How unusual. She generally dealt with the guilty—and some were *very* guilty indeed. Her mind drifted to a certain despicable German chemicals entrepreneur who had become her favourite hit of all time—for reasons not entirely due to the manner of his untimely demise.

## CHAPTER 3

Requiem tapped her thumb impatiently against her phone. Alison Ryan would be leaving work shortly. She studied the pugnacious, chunky lines of the Solomon Lewis building which rose nine floors. It was a typically grotesque monument to brutalist architecture. Odd that it never went to ten storeys. It was as though even the builders couldn't contain their revulsion and walked away at number nine.

This concrete eyesore had been pressed into work when four of the city's major buildings had been shut down for asbestos removal last year. So, crammed within its confines now were the Supreme Court of Victoria on Ground Level, Police Headquarters above that, the Australian Taxation Department, higher still, and assorted government offices on the top floors. It meant that literally anyone in Victoria having a bad day involving crime or punishment would wind up here.

She glanced at her watch. Ryan should exit her building at 5:03pm. Requiem admired her punctuality.

Her phone rang, and she answered, still keeping an eye on the building.

"Req? I have answers," a tinny voice said.

"I'm all ears."

"That party works on the second floor of Solomon Lewis."

*Level two?* "She's a cop?" Requiem asked incredulously.

"Nah," came an amused reply. "Administrative assistant. A lifer. Wanna hear her job descrip? 'Develop and maintain computerised records and systems. Liaise with, and provide information to members of the Department, Victoria Police, and external contacts on behalf of the office. Perform courier and coffee-making duties as required.'"

"She makes a spit over forty-six gees per annum plus super. She's been doing it for decades. I swear my blind, deaf Great Aunt Edith has more fun

in a day. Your girl has no dirt of any kind on her personnel file. Okay, so that all?”

“Yes.”

The phone went dead.

She glanced back at the building. Still no sign of her quarry. Requiem was seated on a park bench facing a small public lawn across from the entrance. From her perch, where she feigned reading her phone, she had already recognised seven faces in ten minutes—two high-profile lawyers, an article clerk whose father was in one of Victoria’s most prominent underworld families, three career criminals, and one noxious detective. The latter was Detective Senior Sergeant Barry Moore, head of the Homicide Squad.

She lowered her phone slightly. The heavy man had a buzz-cut and was all swagger and rolling beer gut. He slapped on his mirrored sunglasses, loosened the cheap tie on his even cheaper charcoal suit, and headed towards the local pub. With this imbecile in charge, it was little wonder Victoria’s crime lords were, literally, getting away with murder.

Moore’s threat level was low to nil. If the intel from various sources was anything to go by, he was not immune to accepting bribes.

One of her best informants also swore Moore had stomped a pair of homeless men to death in a fit of rage and had covered it up. It had acquired the cop the nickname of Zebra: An ass with stripes. That was too kind for the festering boil. The underworld was far too unimaginative. No wonder Requiem was always in work.

Requiem had nothing but contempt for men like this who could not control themselves. And wearing the badge that he did meant Moore was a hypocrite to boot. His mother must be so proud.

He strode off as if he was god’s gift to policing, and she wondered, not for the first time, how such an individual with so many anger issues had been put in charge of an entire police unit.

As Moore passed, he tilted his bulbous face in Requiem’s direction, giving her a view of a spider’s web of broken capillaries. He was a walking advertisement on the merits of sobriety. Moore spat on the footpath and plodded off down a side street. Requiem’s lip curled in disgust.

She glanced at her watch again and wondered what was keeping her target. After a week of following her, Requiem now knew Ryan was a creature of habit. Exceedingly dull habit.

*Leave home at 8am. Reach her government office at 8:52am. Emerge from the tower at 12:03pm, buy the same salad on whole-wheat sandwich, bottled water or coffee (white, two sugars)—depending on the weather—and apple (Granny Smith) each day at the same sandwich bar, Toast Amazeballs. Return to work at 12:27pm. Exit the building at 5:03pm. Home by 5:55pm.*

The only variation was whether she took a train or drove. That decision seemed random. Though Requiem was sure, given enough time, she would figure that pattern out, too.

She appeared to have no friends. She also never left the building with anyone, as others often did.

Ryan's home life, Requiem had discovered, was as uninspiring as her work existence. Ryan cracked the door to her seventies suburban home at 5:30am, peered up at the weather pensively, and crept outside in old house shoes and a robe—worn over her pyjamas—to collect her newspaper.

It usually rolled into the agave patch, which the neighbour's feral cat liberally fertilised during the night. Ryan always frowned and gingerly pulled the paper out and wiped it down on the dewy, half-dead grass eking out an existence on the tiny front lawn. Then she'd sigh, look resigned, and pad back inside.

Like clockwork, every single day.

Half an hour later, her mother, Elsie, bellowed for her tea and her meds and complained loudly about everything else.

Ryan's family appeared, so far, to be comprised of just this abusive, acid-tongued mother, and Requiem's surreptitious poking through the letterbox contents over a week had confirmed it. All mail went to Elsie/E. Ryan, and it was as though her daughter had been rendered invisible.

Elsie was by turns furious, bitter, or, when a visitor called during the day, sweet as a peach. After a week, Requiem knew precisely how the elder Ryan liked her tea, food, meds, and life—the polar opposite of however her daughter did it.

Not that Alison ever complained. God forbid. The tortured woman never said much of anything to her mother. She just took it. Requiem was starting to wonder if killing her would be a mercy.

At 5:09pm the reason for the target's delay was clear. Requiem edged forward to the office building, her phone now pocketed, and watched the security guard attempting to hit on Ryan.

The muscled ape seemed to be making an artform out of stroking her arm while trying to simultaneously flex his biceps. This was not an achievable feat as it turned out. She edged closer. For god's sake, the woman wasn't in a petting zoo.

Ryan shook her head at him, her mouth pulled down in a grimace. As Ryan firmly and politely yanked her arm back, she said sorry repeatedly. Requiem didn't even need her lip-reading skills to follow what was happening.

Requiem's nostrils flared. *Sorry?* If it had been her, the man would be the one apologising. And then probably pissing his pants.

Finally free, Ryan exited the building with a tight expression and surprising speed.

Requiem forced herself back into the zone, watching which direction the quarry was headed, noting her body language, pace, and turn of her head.

*This* was Requiem's forte.

The art of surveillance was to know the nature of man. All humans, from cleaners to CEOs, from spies to drug couriers, were creatures of routine and habit, making them hopelessly flawed. Even the most formidable opponent, skilled in the art of defence, would still have cracks.

So, the key to getting close to this prey was all about knowing her rhythms, profiling her well, and walking in her shoes until you virtually share the same blisters.

All Requiem needed to know was *who* she was at a cellular level, not her lists of crimes or infractions. And, of course, she had to stay unseen while gathering this information.

Requiem had once tailed a legendary former agent for a week without him knowing. He was an ASIO asset turned underworld figure so skilled in the spy game he'd been dubbed The Master. So, when she finally cornered him, it

was immensely gratifying to see the man staring at her from the doorstep of his safe house, one hand still frozen on the key in the lock he'd been turning.

"How?" was all he asked, his voice cracking.

She merely smiled. How? He was arrogant and flawed. He had looked right at her dozens of times in the previous week and never seen her. She'd just been some housewife out shopping that he'd dismissed as a no one.

This was the art, and at this particular game of cat and mouse, Requiem was unmatched. She quickened her pace behind her target and mused at how galling it was to use her gift on a quarry so far beneath Requiem's skillset.

Ryan was clearly clueless to the point of oblivious. Requiem suspected she could walk right beside the woman for ten blocks and she wouldn't even notice.

There was a faint leakage from Ryan's headphones, and she tried to stitch together the musical strains she could hear to work out the composition's name.

She identified the piece after a few more blocks of trailing her. Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel*. So the little mouse had a decent musical palate, Requiem would give her that. They neared the parking building entrance Ryan used when she wasn't catching the train. But instead of going inside, the woman kept walking.

This was new. A few quick lefts, then rights, and a left again and the unthinkable happened.

Alison Ryan disappeared.

Requiem stopped cold, eyeing the inner-city alley in front of her. Her neck snapped around. She should have been *right here*. What the hell? She was about to retrace her steps when her prey stepped out from behind a large green industrial bin and folded her arms, glaring.

"Are you following me?" she asked furiously. She plucked her ear buds out and shoved them and her MP3 player into her bag.

Requiem started and glanced over her shoulder.

"Yes, you. Lady with the fuck-'em-all attitude. Are. You. Following. Me?"

Requiem scowled. So the mouse had teeth. "Why would I be following you?"

Ryan tilted her head. "That's what I was asking myself. You've been following me since I left work."



“Or going in the same direction.” Requiem gave a slow smile. “You really should see someone about that paranoia.”

Ryan glared at her. “I notice you didn’t answer my question. So here’s an easier one—if you aren’t following me, where are you going? There’s nothing much of anything around here.”

Requiem didn’t respond. *She* didn’t answer to anyone and certainly not to her quarry. She pushed aside the small part of her brain impressed at having been spotted at all, let alone so quickly. She’d never had the tables turned like this. And by an amateur?

Requiem stared her down, unmoving, unflinching, and damned sure she wasn’t about to start answering questions.

Ryan’s expression became more suspicious. “Who *are* you?” She shifted her weight from foot to foot, as if deciding whether to run.

Up this close, it became apparent that Ryan wore no make-up at all. The woman appeared fit and fine-boned. In her own way, she had an arresting, sincere look, veering towards pleasing. But it was obvious she wasn’t aware of that.

Her hair had been pulled back from her face in a short, brown ponytail highlighting her high cheekbones and pale skin. No freckles. No lines. She was unblemished, which made her highly unusual in the circles Requiem moved in.

Ryan suddenly plunged her hand into her bag and wrenched it out again. She held a small canister in her fist.

Requiem was startled. Irritation for her slow reaction flared. Stopping to admire a prey’s flawless skin-care regime could get her ass in a hole in the ground.

“I have capsicum spray, in case you think I’m worth robbing,” Ryan warned. “Trust me, it’s not worth it. Your eyes will feel like they’re on fire.” She pointed the canister menacingly at Requiem.

She looked so earnest, so ferocious—like a puppy that thinks it’s a pitbull—that for a moment, Requiem was derailed. She stared at her in surprise before she regained her equilibrium.

Then she suddenly laughed. It was absurd. All of it. Requiem took a step forward, daring the little mouse to react. “Well go on then,” she goaded her. “I’d mace me, too, if you really think I’m some threat.”

Ryan's hand twitched as though she really was contemplating a pre-emptive strike.

Honestly, it was adorable. Requiem had to chuckle at her ballsiness. She shook her head and ambled over, closing her hand around the small fist and its cargo.

Requiem lowered her voice.

"I really don't think though your fresh mint breath spray will have quite the same impact as capsicum. Do you?"

She prised it from her hand, studied the label to confirm her guess, and then gave her a knowing smile as she handed it back.

"Oh," Ryan said. "I didn't think you could read the label from that far away."

"I have excellent vision."

Ryan rammed the small canister back in her handbag and studied her. "I really don't have any cash on me."

"I'm not robbing you," Requiem sighed. "Do I *look* like some two-bit, back-alley thug? She pushed her dark sunglasses to the top of her head and gave her an exasperated eye roll.

Ryan suddenly blinked in surprise as she met her eyes.

"Oh," she said, snapping her fingers. "I know who you are!"

Requiem's eyebrow cocked. "How exciting for you."

"You...you're that cellist. With the VPO. Right?"

"I'm well aware of who I play for." That came out more annoyed than she'd intended so Requiem smiled her best public smile, the reassuring one that contained a few teeth but didn't look as terrifying as it usually did.

"Guilty," she added in her most charming tone.

"And now I know why you're here, too. God, why didn't you just say?"

Ryan seemed so cross, Requiem wanted to laugh again. She resisted the urge as Ryan continued.

"Okay, well, since we're both almost here, we may as well see what the fuss is about, right?"

Requiem nodded, unwilling to ask the obvious. Ryan grinned suddenly.

"I only got emailed the new password an hour ago. I hope it's worth it. Been looking forward to this all month."

She took off down the alley.

In spite of every howl of protest her brain shouted at her—she was supposed to be following her target, not engaging with her—her legs were propelled along in the slipstream of this diminutive woman, completely without Requiem’s permission.

After a block more, Ryan stopped outside a worn red door. She glanced up at Requiem, excitement in her eyes. “I’ll do the honours.”

She rapped three times and, when a small window was shoved open, said: “Yo-Yo Ma.”

The window closed again. A few seconds later the door opened.

Beyond it was the interior of a small, dark club. The smell of spirits and the thick, dull clang of ice bouncing into glasses hit Requiem at the same time. To the right of the bar, which ran down the left wall, was a spot-lit stage, with instruments being set up. She was too far away to determine much more.

“Coming?” Ryan asked, cocking an eyebrow. “I’ll even buy the first round to make up for accusing you of being a ‘two-bit, back-alley thief.’ Fair?”

She headed into the dark bowels of the musical club, leaving Requiem standing on the threshold.

She should just go. Disappear back home. Feed her goldfish...to her cone snail. Put her frozen lasagne on to heat. Work out how to kill Viktor Raven without his new bodyguard blowing her head off.

Besides, it’s not like she could continue watching Ryan any more. Incognito was no longer possible. She still wasn’t sure how the other woman had noticed her. That spelled danger in its own way.

So, really, the safest and most logical course of action would be to just disappear back into the alley. Leave her prey to her night out. She started to pivot away from the club.

Ryan, now at the bar, shot her wide, guileless smile and waved her over.

So innocent. Requiem contemplated her. Innocence was like catnip to assassins, she was sure of it. Against all her better judgment, she took a step forward. Then another. And a third.

Natalya left Requiem outside, cooling her heels, while she stepped forward, drawn into the warmth.

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# REQUIEM FOR IMMORTALS

BY LEE WINTER

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