

JANUARY

EDDIE

For a trial lawyer, there are two words in the English language that terrify us more than any other. These two words stared back at me from my phone. They'd come through by text message seconds ago.

THEY'RE BACK.

The jury had been out for all of forty-eight minutes.

There's a lot you can do in forty-eight minutes. You can have lunch. You can change the oil in your car. You can probably even watch an episode of a TV show.

But one thing you can't do in forty-eight minutes is come to a fair and balanced verdict in the most complex murder trial in the history of New York City. That's not possible. It was probably a question from the jury, I thought. This isn't the verdict.

It can't be.

Across the street, on the corner of Lafayette, is the Corte Café. From the outside it looks inviting. Inside, it's coffee and breakfast sandwiches on plastic tables and chairs. Usually three or more lawyers cool their asses on those chairs. You can always tell the ones who are waiting on a jury. They can't eat. They can't sit still. They unnerve the place like a guy sitting there with a machete on his lap. I used to go there when I was waiting on a verdict, but the sight of another lawyer in jury limbo is enough to put anyone off the coffee in the Corte Café. And the coffee is good.

So instead of chewing on the furniture, I grabbed a coffee to go and headed out to walk the square. I don't know how many times I've walked Foley Square. My record is three days. That's how long a jury took to acquit one of my clients, and I damn near burrowed a trench into the sidewalk with my heels. This time, I

had only just stepped out of the Corte Café, coffee in hand, when I got the text.

I dumped the go cup, crossed the street, and made my way around the corner to the Manhattan Criminal Court building. The stars and stripes flew from a flagpole thirty feet above the entrance doors. It was an old flag. High winds, rain and time had not been kind. Its colors had faded, and the flag was torn almost in two. Some sections of stars had unraveled and were lost in the winds. Huge threads billowed outwards from the red and white stripes, almost reaching to the paving below. There was money to replace it. Times were hard, and only getting harder, but the flag was usually kept pristine even if the roof was leaking. I thought they should keep this old flag – the sun-bleached colors, rips and tears somehow seemed appropriate in these times. I could only guess the justices felt the same way. With children in cages at the border, the stars and stripes had lost their luster for some. I'd never known my country so divided.

A raven perched on the end of the flagpole. A large black bird with a long beak and sharp claws. The first ravens to return to New York City were spotted back in 2016. Normally found upstate; no one knew why they had come back. They made their nests in the high corners of bridges and overpasses, sometimes even telephone or electrical towers. They fed on garbage and the dead things that curled up in the corners of alleyways all over the city.

As I passed beneath the raven it let out a sound – *croaaaak* – *croaaaak*. I didn't know if it was a greeting or a warning.

Whatever it was, it unsettled me.

Before I took this case I didn't believe in evil. Up to that point in my life I'd met and fought with men and women who did evil things, but I put it down to purely human weaknesses – greed, lust, rage, or desire. Some people were sick, too. In the head. You could say they weren't responsible for their terrible crimes.

As I was waved past security in the court building lobby, I couldn't stop these thoughts. They invaded my mind – poisoning it. Each thought was another drop of blood in a cool glass of water. It doesn't take long before all you can see is red.

Most killers I'd come across I could make a stab at some kind of explanation for their behavior. Something in their past or their psychology that held the key to their reasoning and criminal behavior. I was always able to rationalize it.

This time, there was no easy explanation. No key.

This one I couldn't rationalize. Not really. There was something dark at the heart of this case.

Something evil.

And I had felt its touch. It had hung over this case like the ravens hanging over the city.

Watching.

Waiting.

Then swooping down to kill with a sharp claw and razor bill. Dark and black, fast and deadly.

There was no other way to describe it. No better word for it. People can be good. There is such a thing as a good person. Someone who does good things because they enjoy it. Why, then, can't the opposite be true? Why can't a person just be evil because they enjoy it? I hadn't thought of it that way before, but now I could see the sense. Evil is real. It lives in dark places, and it can consume a human being like a cancer.

So many had died. And perhaps more would die before the end. When I was a kid growing up in a small, cold house in Brooklyn, my mom told me there was no such thing as monsters. The stories I'd read as a kid about monsters and witches and taking children away from their parents, into the forest, well, she said they were just fairytales. *There are no monsters*, she said.

She was wrong.

The Criminal Court building elevators were old and painfully slow. They took me to my floor, I got out and walked the corridor to the court room, following everyone else inside. I took my seat at the defense table next to my client. After the huge audience was seated, the doors were closed. The judge was already ensconced on the bench.

A hush fell as the jury filed in.

They had already given the paperwork to the clerk. Paperwork they'd completed in the jury room. My client tried to say

something, but I didn't hear her clearly. I couldn't. Blood roared in my ears.

I was a pretty good judge of which way a jury would fall. I could call it. And I was right, every single damn time. I knew before I took a case on whether my client was guilty.

I'd spent many years as a con artist before I turned those skills into a law practice, with little adjustment. Conning a drug dealer out of two hundred grand isn't a kick in the ass away from conning a jury into bringing home the right verdict. Innocent people went to jail all the time – but not on my watch. Not anymore. I'd learned – in bars, in diners, on the streets – how to read people. I was good at it. So when it came to plying my trade in the courtroom, I knew whether my client was guilty from the first meeting. And if they were guilty but wanted to maintain their innocence in court, I wished them good luck and waved them goodbye. I'd been down that path years ago, and the cost was too great to bear. I'd ignored my gut, let my client walk. He was guilty and I'd turned him loose. He hurt someone. So I hurt him. In some ways, I was still paying for that mistake. No one is infallible. Everyone can be conned.

Even me.

Reading clients and reading juries was my bag. This case wasn't normal. There was nothing remotely normal about it.

This was the first verdict that I couldn't call. I was too close to it. In my mind, it was an even split. The verdict may as well come down to a coin toss. A fifty-fifty. I knew what I wanted to happen. I now knew who the killer was. I just didn't know if the jury would see it. I was jury blind.

And I was tired. I hadn't slept in weeks. Not since that dark red night.

The clerk stood and addressed the jury foreman.

'In these matters, have you reached verdicts upon which you are all agreed?' asked the clerk.

'We have,' said the jury foreman.