

A VICTOR THRILLER

TOM WOOD

'Explosive'

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Orphan X

THE FINAL HOUR

He tried to kill her.
Now she needs his help

ONE

The priest was a short man who was stooped in posture, making him shorter still, but he carried himself with gravitas, especially when he spoke. His voice was deep and boomed without effort. He was often told he could not whisper. A useful trait when addressing his congregation, but not so useful when hearing confession. He compensated by cupping his left hand over his mouth. It helped keep the sins of his flock a little more private.

The confessor was already in the box, waiting with patience, so quiet and still that the priest almost didn't notice him. He decided not to comment on the confessor's own impatience. It was only right to wait outside until the priest was ready to hear the confession. No matter, but he would try to mention it at the end. Manners were a close third after godliness and cleanliness.

He knew he should not, but he couldn't help but speculate who might be so eager to confess. The priest knew

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almost everyone in the area by name and by voice. They were decent people, but ones who sinned in thought and deed like any others. As a young man he had served in towns and cities and heard confessions that had reddened his face in embarrassment or caught his breath with shock. Here though, the sins were what he called ‘baby sins’. People lusted, but didn’t commit adultery; they envied, but didn’t steal; they could succumb to wrath, but only with their fists. They were simple people and now he was old he enjoyed the simple life he had built with them. The priest was well liked because he relished his whiskey as much as the villagers and didn’t give them more Hail Marys than they could handle.

The church was set atop a low hill overlooking a village. The village was located on the southwestern tip of Ireland, in County Cork. It was a small, isolated place, with a single bus service that made the trip to Cork and back once per day. A handsome village in the priest’s humble opinion, populated by those who loved the Lord and whiskey in equal measure. There were but four shops in the entire village, but also four pubs. The church was built in the middle of the nineteenth century and was still standing tall and strong. Larger than the village needed, but a fine building nonetheless. The floor of the nave was composed of tiles, aquamarine, white and pale green. The interior walls were white and the beams that supported the roof overhead were stained dark. The pews were simple and in need of some sanding and polishing, but where was the money for such frivolity? It was dedicated to Our Lady, Star of the Sea and Saint Patrick.

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The confessor said, 'Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been exactly one year since my last confession.'

The priest was intrigued by this exactitude. Most confessors spoke in general terms to ease their own guilt. A few days meant a week. A week meant ten days. A couple of weeks was a month. A year meant eighteen months. A long time meant several years. I don't remember meant a lifetime ago. The priest was a precise man and respected others who were also precise.

The voice that spoke to him belonged to no Irishman, which was rare. The confessor had almost no accent, if such a thing could be true. The words were well enunciated, perfect in pronunciation, but flat and monotone. An Englishman, he presumed, but a traveller who spoke several languages, and had lost any quintessential Englishness from his speaking voice. The priest liked to hypothesise when dealing with new people. Uncommon now, but it was a habit that had served him well in his past life. The Englishman was no doubt here to explore rural Ireland – the Ireland of postcards and folk songs.

The screen that separated them offered privacy, but no secrecy. Through the lattice the priest could see the confessor, who was a dark-haired man in a grey suit.

The priest said, 'Tell me about your sins, my child.'

'I have killed many people.'

The priest was unfazed. 'Is this some kind of joke, because it's neither funny nor original. It's one thing to waste my time, but it's another to waste the time of this church and squander that of those who are in need.'

'I assure you, it is no joke.'

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'I see,' the priest said, and settled himself for what would follow.

It hadn't happened to him since he had moved out here to the wilds, but when he had worked in areas with larger populations he had dealt with the occasional oddball. Some confessors were borderline insane or outright mad. They confessed outlandish crimes, looking for attention or even believing themselves responsible. He had listened to many a Hitler who had survived the war and had been in hiding ever since. He had heard the confessions of many a Satan.

'Okay,' the priest said. 'We'll start from the beginning. Why have you killed people?'

'I'm a professional assassin.'

'Yes, of course. And how many people have you killed?'

'I'm not sure.'

Despite the ridiculousness of what he was hearing the priest couldn't help but think about the fact he had taken the confession of real killers before. Those who had fought in the Troubles. He was still disturbed by the things he had been told.

'How can you not know how many people you killed?'

'I poisoned a woman recently,' the confessor answered. 'I'm not sure if she died.'

'Why did you poison her? Were you paid to?'

'No,' he said. 'We were enemies, then allies of convenience. After that alliance was no longer necessary, I considered her my enemy again.'

'I see.' He didn't. 'Why are you not sure whether she died?'

'I told her how to beat the poison. I gave her a chance at

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life if she was strong enough to take it. It's not yet safe to check whether she was or not.'

'Why did you give her this . . . *chance*, as you put it?'

'She convinced me I might need her help one day. She had already proven herself capable of fulfilling such a role.'

It was a fantasy. It was a delusion. The confessor really believed what he was saying. Which was frightening in a different way. The priest hoped there was help out there for him. For now, the best the priest could do was humour the fantasist to keep him calm. The priest didn't want to cause a scene that would upset those who were genuine in their need.

'Do you care if she lives or dies?'

The English confessor was quiet for a moment, then said, 'If she dies, then I have eliminated a dangerous threat. If she lives, then I have gained a useful associate.'

'In which case, if she does indeed survive, maybe you should send her flowers. But that's not the answer I wanted.'

'It's the only one I'm able to provide.'

The priest rolled his eyes and said, 'Are you sorry for what you have done? Is your conscience heavy with guilt?'

'No,' the confessor said.

'Then why are you even here?'

The confessor was quiet for a time. The priest didn't hurry the answer. Instead, he waited, curious.

'This is something I have to do. Habit, or perhaps addiction would be a more appropriate word.'

'Explain.'

'This, here and now, is a remnant of the person I once was.'

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There was a neutrality in the confessor's voice that belied the sadness of the words. The priest was intrigued as to who might create such a broken delusion, and what life they sought to escape in doing so.

The priest said, 'What do you hope to achieve with this confession?'

'What do you mean?' the confessor asked.

'You don't seek absolution. If you don't feel remorse for your sins then this process is pointless. You have to accept your sins if you want forgiveness.'

'And God will forgive me, no matter what I've done, if I only ask for it?'

'Yes, that's how it works,' the priest said to bring the conversation to a close. 'Say nine Hail Marys and ten Our Fathers and you will be absolved of your sins.'

'Thank you, Father.'

He said, 'Go to confession more than once a year.'

'I'll try.'

The priest smiled to himself. Never a dull moment. 'And don't kill any more people.'

The confessor said, 'I can't promise that.'