

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DAVID BALDACCI

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—Cleveland Plain Dealer*



THE HIT

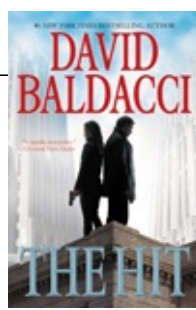
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—
THE HIT



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To the cast and crew of
Wish You Well,
thanks for an incredible ride

1

FEELING ENERGIZED BY THE DEATH that was about to happen, Doug Jacobs adjusted his headset and brightened his computer screen. The picture was now crystal clear, almost as if he were there.

But he thanked God he wasn't.

There was thousands of miles away, but one couldn't tell that by looking at the screen. They couldn't pay him enough to be *there*. Besides, many people were far better suited for that job. He would be communicating shortly with one of them.

Jacobs briefly glanced around the four walls and the one window of his office in the sunny Washington, D.C., neighborhood. It was an ordinary-looking low-rise brick building set in a mixed-use neighborhood that also contained historical homes in various states of either decay or restoration. But some parts of Jacobs's building were not ordinary at all. These elements included a heavy-gauge steel gate out front with a high fence around the perimeter of the property. Armed sentries patrolled the interior halls and surveillance cameras monitored the exterior. But there was nothing on the outside to clue anyone in to what was happening on the inside.

And a lot was happening on the inside.

Jacobs picked up his mug of fresh coffee, into which he had just poured three sugar packets. Watching the screen required intense concentration. Sugar and caffeine helped him do that. It would match the emotional buzz he would have in just a few minutes.

He spoke into the headset. "Alpha One, confirm location," he said crisply. It occurred to him that he sounded like an air traffic controller trying to keep the skies safe.

Well, in a way that's exactly what I am. Only our goal is death on every trip.

The response was nearly immediate. "Alpha One location seven hundred meters west of target. Sixth floor of the apartment building's east face, fourth window over from the left. You should just be able to make out the end of my rifle muzzle on a zoom-in."

Jacobs leaned forward and moved his mouse, zooming in on the real-time satellite feed from this distant city that was home to many enemies of the United States. Hovering over the edge of the windowsill, he saw just the tip of a long suppressor can screwed onto a rifle's muzzle. The rifle was a customized piece of weaponry that could kill at long distances—well, so long as a skilled hand and eye were operating it.

And right now that was the case.

"Roger that, Alpha One. Cocked and locked?"

"Affirmative. All factors dialed in on scope. Crosshairs on terminal spot. Tuned frequency-shifting suppressor. Setting sun behind me and in their faces. No optics reflect. Good to go."

"Copy that, Alpha One."

Jacobs checked his watch. "Local time there seventeen hundred?"

"On the dot. Intel update?"

Jacobs brought this information up on a subscreen. "All on schedule. Target will be arriving in five minutes. He'll exit the limo on the curbside. He's scheduled to take a minute of questions on the curb and then it's a ten-second walk into the building."

"Ten-second walk into the building confirmed?"

"Confirmed," said Jacobs. "But the minute of interview may go longer. You play it as it goes."

"Copy that."

Jacobs refocused on the screen for a few minutes until he saw it. "Okay, motorcade is approaching."

"I see it. I've got my sight line on the straight and narrow. No obstructions."

"The crowd?"

"I've been watching the patterns of the people for the last hour. Security has roped them off. They've outlined the path he'll take for me, like a lighted runway."

"Right. I can see that now."

Jacobs loved being ringside for these things, without actually being in the danger zone. He was compensated more generously than the person on the other end of the line. At a certain level this made no sense at all.

The shooter's ass was out there, and if the shot wasn't successful or the exit cues made swiftly, the gunman was dead. Back here, there would be no acknowledgment of affiliation, only a blanket denial. The shooter had no documents, no creds, no ID that would prove otherwise. The shooter would be left to hang. And in the country where this particular hit was taking place, hanging would be the shooter's fate. Or perhaps beheading.

All the while, Jacobs sat here safe and drew bigger money.

But he thought, *Lots of folks can shoot straight and get away. I'm the one doing the geopolitical wrangling on these suckers. It's all in the prep. And I'm worth every dollar.*

Jacobs again spoke into his headset. "Approach is right on target. Limo is about to stop."

"Copy that."

"Give me a sixty-second buffer before you're about to fire. We'll go silent."

"Roger that."

Jacobs tightened the grip on his mouse, as though it were a trigger. During drone attacks he had actually clicked his mouse and watched a target disappear in a flame ball. The computer hardware manufacturer had probably never envisioned its devices being used for *that*.

His breathing accelerated even as he knew the shooter's respiration was heading the other way, achieving cold zero, which was what one needed to make a long-range shot like this. There was no margin of error at all. The shot had to hit and kill the target. It was that simple.

The limo stopped. The security team opened the door. Bulky, sweaty men with guns and earwigs looked everywhere for danger. They were pretty good. But pretty good did not cut it when you were up against outstanding.

And every asset Jacobs sent out was outstanding.

The man stepped onto the sidewalk and squinted against the sun's dying glare. He was a megalomaniac named Ferat Ahmadi who desired to lead a troubled, violent nation down an even darker road. That could not be allowed to happen.

Thus it was time to nip this little problem in the bud. There were others in his country ready to take over. They were less evil than he was, and capable of being manipulated by more civilized nations. In today's overly complex world, where allies and foes seemed to change on a weekly basis, that was as good as it got.

But that was not Jacobs's concern. He was here simply to execute an assignment, with emphasis on the "execute" part.

Then over his headset came two words: "Sixty seconds."

"Copy that, Alpha One," said Jacobs. He didn't say anything as stupid as "good luck." Luck had nothing to do with it.

He engaged a countdown clock on his computer screen.

He eyed the target and then the clock.

Jacobs watched Ahmadi talk to the reporters. He took a sip of coffee, set it down, and continued to watch as Ahmadi finished with his prearranged questions. The man took a step away from the reporters. The security team held them back.

The chosen path was revealed. For the photo op it would present, Ahmadi was going to walk it alone. It was designed to show his leadership and his courage.

It was also a security breach that looked trivial at ground level. But with a trained sniper at an elevated position it was like a fifty-yard gash in the side of a ship with a billion-candlepower beacon lighting it.

Twenty seconds became ten.

Jacobs started counting the last moments in his head, his eyes glued to the screen.

Dead man arriving, he thought.

Almost there. Mission nearly complete, and then it was on to the next target.

That is, after a steak dinner and a favorite cocktail and trumpeting this latest victory to his coworkers.

Three seconds became one.

Jacobs saw nothing except the screen. He was totally focused, as though he were going to deliver the kill shot himself.

The window shattered.

The round entered Jacobs's back after slicing through his ergonomic chair. It cleared his body and thundered out of his chest. It ended up cracking the computer screen as Ferat Ahmadi walked into the building unharmed.

Doug Jacobs, on the other hand, slumped to the floor.

No steak dinner. No favorite cocktail. No bragging rights ever again.

Dead man arrived.

HE JOGGED ALONG THE PARK trail with a backpack over his shoulders. It was nearly seven at night. The air was crisp and the sun was almost down. The taxis were honking. The pedestrians were marching home from a long day's work.

Horse-drawn carriages were lined up across from the Ritz-Carlton. Irishmen in shabby top hats were awaiting their next fares as the light grew fainter. Their horses pawed the pavement and their bit heads dipped into feed buckets.

It was midtown Manhattan in all its glory, the contemporary and the past mingling like coy strangers at a party.

Will Robie looked neither right nor left. He had been to New York many times. He had been to Central Park many times.

He was not here as a tourist.

He never went anywhere as a tourist.

The hoodie was drawn up and tied tight in front so his face was not visible. Central Park had lots of surveillance cameras. He didn't want to end up on any of them.

The bridge was up ahead. He reached it, stopped, and jogged in place, cooling down.

The door was built into the rock. It was locked.

He had a pick gun and then the door was no longer locked.

He slipped inside and secured the door behind him. This was a combination storage and electrical power room used by city workers who kept Central Park clean and lighted. They had gone home for the day and would not be back until eight the next morning.

That would be more than enough time to do what needed doing.

Robie slipped off the knapsack and opened it. Inside were all the things he required to do his work.

Robie had recently turned forty. He was about six-one, a buck eighty, with far more muscle than fat. It was wiry muscle. Big muscles were of no help whatsoever. They only slowed him down when speed was almost as essential as accuracy.

There were a number of pieces of equipment in the knapsack. Over the course of two minutes he turned three of those pieces into one with a highly specialized purpose.

A sniper rifle.

The fourth piece of equipment was just as valuable to him.

His scope.

He attached it to the Picatinny rail riding on the top of his rifle.

He went through every detail of the plan in his head twenty times, both the shot he had to make and his safe exit that would hopefully follow. He had already memorized everything, but he wanted to arrive at the point where he no longer had to think, just act. That would save precious seconds.

This all took about ninety minutes.

Then he ate dinner. A bottle of G2 and a protein bar.

~~This was Will Robie's version of a Friday night date with himself.~~

He lay down on the cement floor of the storage room, folded his knapsack under his head, and went to sleep.

In ten hours and eleven minutes it would be time to go to work.

While other people his age were either going home to spouses and kids or going out with coworkers or maybe on a date, Robie was sitting alone in a glorified closet in Central Park waiting for someone to appear so Robie could kill him.

He could dwell on the current state of his life and arrive at nothing satisfactory in the way of an answer, or he could simply ignore it. He chose to ignore it. But perhaps not as easily as he once had.

Still, he had no trouble falling asleep.

And he would have no trouble waking up.

And he did, nine hours later.

It was morning. Barely past six a.m.

Now came the next important step. Robie's sight line. In fact, it was the most critical of all.

Inside the storage room, he was staring at a blank stone wall with wide mortar seams. But if one looked more closely, there were two holes in the seams, which had been placed at precise locations to allow one to see outside. However, the holes had been filled back in with a pliable material tinted to look like mortar. This had all been done a week ago by a team posing as a repair crew in the park.

Robie used a pincers to grip one end of the substance and pull it out. He did this one more time and the two holes were now revealed.

Robie slid his rifle muzzle through the lower hole, stopping it before it reached the end of the hole. This configuration would severely restrict his angle of aim, but he could do nothing about that. It was what it was. He never operated in perfect conditions.

His scope lined up precisely with the top hole, its leading edge resting firmly on the mortar seam. Now he could see what he was shooting at.

Robie sighted through it, dialing in all factors both environmental and otherwise that would affect his task.

His suppressor jacket was customized to fit the muzzle and the ordnance he was chambering. The jacket would reduce the muzzle blast and sonic signature, and it would physically reflect back toward the gun's stock to minimize the suppressor's length.

He checked his watch. Ten minutes to go.

He put in his earwig and clipped the power pack to his belt. His comm set was now up and running.

He sighted through the scope again. His crosshairs were suspended over one particular spot in the park.

Because he couldn't move his rifle barrel, Robie would have a millisecond's glimpse of his target and then his finger would pull the trigger.

If he was late by a millisecond, the target would survive.

If he was early by a millisecond, the target would survive.

Robie took this margin of error in stride. He had had easier assignments, to be sure. And also tougher ones.

He took a breath, and relaxed his muscles. Normally he would have someone acting as a long-distance spotter. However, Robie's recent experiences with partners in the field had been disastrous, and he had demanded to go solo on this one. If the target didn't show, or changed course, Robie would

get a stand-down signal over his comm pack.

He looked around the small space. It would be his home for a few minutes more and then he would never see it again. Or if he screwed up, this might be the last place he ever saw.

He checked his watch again. Two minutes to go. He didn't return to his rifle just yet. Taking up his weapon too early could make his muscles rigid and his reflexes too brittle, when flexibility and fluidity were needed.

At forty-five seconds to target, he knelt and pressed his eye to the scope and his finger to the trigger guard. His earwig had remained silent. That meant his target was on the way. The mission was a go.

He wouldn't look at his watch again. His internal clock was now as accurate as any Swiss timepiece. He focused on his optics.

Scopes were great, but they were also finicky. A target could be lost in a heartbeat and precious seconds could pass before it was reacquired, which guaranteed failure. He had his own way of dealing with that possibility. At thirty seconds to target he started exhaling longer breaths, walking his respiration and heart rate down notch by notch, breath by elongated breath. Cold zero was what he was looking for, that sweet spot for trigger pulls that almost always ensured the kill would happen. No finger tremble, no jerk of the hand, no wavering of the eye.

Robie couldn't hear his target. He couldn't yet see him.

But in ten seconds he would both hear and see him.

And then he would have a bare moment to acquire the target and fire.

The last second popped up on his internal counter.

His finger dropped to the trigger.

In Will Robie's world once that happened there was no going back.

3

THE MAN JOGGING ALONG did not worry about his security. He paid others to worry for him. Perhaps a wiser man would have realized that no one valued a specific life more than its owner. But he was not the wisest of men. He was a man who had run afoul of powerful political enemies, and the price for that was just about to come due.

He jogged along, his lean frame moving up and down with each thrust of hip and leg. Around him were four men, two slightly in front and two slightly behind him. They were fit and active, and all four had to slow down their normal pace a bit to match his.

The five men were of similar height and build and wearing matching black running suits. This was by design because it resulted in five potential targets instead of one. Arms and legs swinging in unison, feet pounding the trail, heads and torsos moving at steady but still slightly different angles. It all added up to a nightmare for someone looking to take a long-distance shot.

In addition, the man in the center of the group wore lightweight body armor that would stop most rifle rounds. Only a head shot would be guaranteed lethal, and a head shot here over any distance beyond the unaided eye was problematic. There were too many physical obstacles. And they had spies in the park; anyone looking suspicious or carrying anything that might be out of the ordinary would be tagged and sat on until the man had passed. There had been two of those so far and no more.

And yet the four men were professional, and they anticipated that despite their best efforts, someone might still be out there. They kept their gazes swiveling, their reflexes primed to move into accelerated action if necessary.

The curve coming up was good in a way. It broke off potential sniper sight lines, and fresh ones would not pick up for another ten yards. Though they were trained not to do so, each man relaxed just a fraction.

The suppressed round was still loud enough to catapult a flock of pigeons from the ground to about a foot in the air, their wings flapping and their beaked mouths cooing in protest at this early morning disturbance.

The man in the center of the joggers pitched forward. Where his face had once been was a gaping hole.

The long-distance flight of a 7.62 round built up astonishing kinetic energy. In fact, the farther it traveled the more energy it built up. When it finally ran into a solid object like a human head the result was devastating.

The four men watched in disbelief as their protectee lay on the ground, his black running suit now mottled with blood, brain, and human tissue. They pulled their guns and looked wildly around for someone to shoot. The security chief spoke into his phone, dialing up reinforcements. They were no longer a protection detail. They were a revenge detail.

Only there was no one on whom to exact that revenge.

It had been a scope kill, and all four men wondered how that was possible, on the curve of all places.

The only people visible were other joggers or walkers. None could have a rifle concealed on them. They all had stopped and were staring in horror at the man on the ground. If they had known who he was, their horror might have turned to relief.

Will Robie did not take even a second to relish the exceptionally fine shot he had just made. The constraints on his rifle barrel and thus his shot had been enormous. It was like playing a game of Whac-A-Mole. You never knew where or when the target would pop out of the hole. Your reflexes had to be superb, your aim true.

But Robie had done it over a considerable distance with a sniper rifle and not a child's hammer. And his target wasn't a puppet. It could shoot back.

He hefted the tubes of pliable material that had been used to replace the mortar. From his knapsack he took a hardening solution from a bottle and mixed it with some powder he had in another container. He rubbed the mixture on one end and the sides of the two tubes and eased them through the open holes, lining the edges up precisely. Then he rubbed the mixture on the other end of the tubes. Within two minutes the mixture would harden and blend perfectly with the mortar, and one would be unable to slide the tubes out anymore. His sight line had, in essence, vanished, like a magician's assistant in a box.

Knapsack on his back, he was disassembling his weapon as he walked. In the center of the room was a manhole cover. Underneath Central Park were numerous tunnels, some from old subway line construction, some carrying sewage and water, and some just built for now unknown reasons and forgotten about.

Robie was about to use a complicated combination thereof to get the hell out of there.

He slid the manhole cover into place after he lowered himself into the hole. Using a flashlight, he navigated down a metal ladder and his feet hit solid earth thirty feet later. The route he had to follow was in his head. Nothing about a mission was ever written down. Things written down could be discovered if Robie ended up dead instead of his target.

Even for Robie, whose short-term memory was excellent, it had been an arduous process.

He moved methodically, neither fast nor slowly. He had plugged the barrel of his rifle with the quick-hardening solution and pitched it down one tunnel; a constant flow of fast water would carry it out to the East River, where it would sink into oblivion. And even if it were found somehow the plugged barrel would be ruined for any ballistics tests.

The stock of the weapon was dropped down another tunnel under a pile of fallen bricks that looked like they had lain there for a hundred years and probably had. Even if the stock was discovered it could not be traced back to the bullet that had just killed his target. Not without the firing pin, which Robie had already pocketed.

The smells down here were not pleasant. There were over six thousand miles of tunnels under Manhattan, remarkable for an island without a single working mine of any kind. The tunnels carried pipes that transported millions of gallons of drinking water a day to satisfy the inhabitants of America's most populous city. Other tunnels carried away the sewage made by these very same inhabitants to enormous treatment plants that would transform it into a variety of things, often turning waste into something useful.

Robie walked at the same pace for an hour. At the end of that hour he looked up and saw it. The ladder with the markings *DNE EHT*.

“The End” spelled backward. He did not smile at someone’s idea of a lame joke. Killing people was as serious as it got. He had no reason to be particularly happy.

He put on the blue jumpsuit and hard hat that were hanging on a peg on the tunnel wall. Carrying his knapsack on his back, he climbed the ladder and emerged from the opening.

Robie had walked from midtown to uptown entirely underground. He actually would have preferred the subway.

He entered a work zone with barricades erected around an opening to the street. Men in blue jumpsuits just like his worked away at some project. Traffic moved around them, cabs honking. People walked up and down the sidewalks.

Life went on.

Except for the guy back at the park.

Robie didn’t look at any of the workers, and not a single one of them looked at him. He walked to a white van parked next to the work zone and climbed in the passenger side. As soon as his door thunked closed, the driver put the van in gear and drove off. He knew the city well and took alternate routes to avoid most of the traffic as he worked his way out of Manhattan and onto the road to LaGuardia Airport.

Robie climbed into the back to change. When the van pulled up to the terminal’s passenger drop-off, he stepped out dressed in a suit with briefcase in hand and walked into the airport terminal.

LaGuardia, unlike its equally famous cousin, JFK, was king of the short-haul flights, handling more of them than just about any other airport outside of Chicago and Atlanta. Robie’s flight was very short, about forty minutes in the air to D.C.—barely enough time to stow your carry-on, get comfortable, and listen to your belly rumble because you weren’t going to get anything to eat on a flight that brief.

His jet touched down thirty-eight minutes later at Reagan National.

The car was waiting for him.

He got in, picked up the *Washington Post* lying on the backseat, and scanned the headlines. It wasn’t there yet, of course, although there would be news online already. He didn’t care to read about it. He already knew all he needed to know.

But tomorrow the headline on every newspaper in the country would be about the man in Central Park who had gone out to jog for his health and ended up dead as dead could be.

A few would mourn the dead man, Robie knew. They would be his associates, whose opportunity to inflict pain and suffering on others would be gone, hopefully forever. The rest of the world would applaud the man’s demise.

Robie had killed evil before. People were happy, thrilled that another monster had met his end. But the world went on, as screwed up as ever, and another monster—maybe even worse—would replace the fallen one.

On that clear, crisp morning in the normally serene Central Park his trigger pull would be remembered for a while. Investigations would be made. Diplomatic broadsides exchanged. More people would die in retaliation. And then life would go on.

And serving his country, Will Robie would get on a plane or train or bus or, like today, use his own two feet, and pull another trigger, or throw another knife, or strangle the life out of someone using simply his bare hands. And then another tomorrow would come and it would be as though someone had hit a giant reset button and the world would look exactly the same.

But he would continue to do it, and for only one reason. If he didn’t, the world had no chance to get better. If people with some courage in their hearts stood by and did nothing, the monsters won every

time. He was not going to let that happen.

~~The car drove through the streets, reaching the western edge of Fairfax County, Virginia. It pulled through a guarded gate. When it stopped Robie got out and walked into the building. He flashed no creds, and didn't stop to ask permission to enter.~~

He trudged down a short hall to a room where he would sit for a bit, send a few emails, and then go home to his apartment in D.C. Normally after a mission he would walk the streets aimlessly until the wee hours. It was just his way of handling the aftermath of what he did for a living.

Today he simply wanted to go home and sit and do nothing more exacting than stare out his window.

That was not to be.

The man came in.

The man often came in carrying another mission for Robie in the form of a USB stick.

But this time he carried nothing except a frown.

“Blue Man wants to meet with you,” he said simply.

Nothing much the man could have said would have intrigued or surprised Robie.

But this did.

Robie had seen a lot of Blue Man lately. But before that—for twelve years before that, to be precise—he hadn't seen him at all.

“Blue Man?”

“Yes. The car's waiting.”

4

JESSICA REEL SAT ALONE AT a table in the airport lounge. She was dressed in a gray pantsuit with a white blouse. Her flat shoes were black with a single strap over the top of each foot. They were lightweight and built for speed and mobility if she had to run.

Her only nod to eccentricity was the hat that sat on the table in front of her. It was a straw-colored panama with a black silk band, ideally suited for traveling because it was collapsible. Reel had traveled much over the years, but she had never worn a hat during any of those previous trips.

Now had seemed like a good time to start.

Her gaze drifted over thousands of passengers pulling rolling luggage and carrying laptop cases over their shoulders with Starbucks cups cradled in their free hands. These travelers anxiously scanned electronic marquees for gates, cancellations, arrivals, departures. And minutes or hours or days later if the weather was particularly uncooperative, they would climb into silver tubes and be flung hundreds or thousands of miles to their destination of choice, hopefully with most of their bags and their sanity intact.

Millions of people did this same little thirty-thousand-foot-high dance every day in nearly every country on earth. Reel had done it for years. But she had always traveled light. No laptop. Enough clothes for a few days. No work went with her. It was always waiting for her when she got there. Along with all the equipment she would need to complete her designated task.

And then she would make her exit, leaving behind at least one person dead.

She fingered her phone. On the screen was her boarding pass. The name on the e-ticket was not Jessica Reel. That would have been a little inconvenient for her in these suddenly troubled times.

Her last task had not gone according to plan—at least not according to the plan of her former employer. However, it had been executed exactly as Reel had envisioned it, leaving a man named Douglas Jacobs dead.

Because of this Reel would be not only persona non grata back home, but also very much a wanted person. And the people she used to work for had an abundance of agents who could be called up to hunt her down and end her life as efficiently as she had Jacobs's.

That scenario was definitely not in Reel's grand scheme, and thus the new name, fresh documents and panama hat. Her long hair was colored blonde from the natural brown. Tinted contacts transformed greenish eyes to gray. And she had been given a modified nose and a revised jawline courtesy of a bit of ingenious plastic surgery. She was, in all critical respects, a new woman.

And perhaps an enlightened one as well.

Her flight was called. She rose. In her flats she was five-nine—tall for a woman—but she blended in nicely with the bustling crowd. She donned her hat, purchased her Starbucks, and walked to the nearby gate. The flight left on time.

Forty somewhat bumpy minutes later it landed with a hard jolt on the runway tarmac minutes

ahead of a storm's leading edge. The turbulence had not bothered Reel. She always played the odds. She could fly every day for twenty thousand years and never be involved in a crash.

Her odds of survival on the ground would not be nearly as good.

She walked off the plane, made her way to the cabstand, and waited patiently in a long line until her turn came up.

Doug Jacobs had been the first but not the last. Reel had a list in her head of those who would, hopefully, join him in the hereafter, if there was such a place for people like Jacobs.

But the list would have to wait. Reel had somewhere to go. She climbed into the next available cab and set off for the city.

The cab dropped her near Central Park. The park was always a busy place, full of people and dogs and events and workers, controlled chaos if ever there was such a thing.

Reel paid the cabbie and turned her attention to the closest entrance to the park. She walked through the opening and made her way as close as possible to where it had happened.

The police had taped off great chunks of the area so they could perform their little forensics hunt, collect their evidence, and hopefully catch a killer.

They would fail. Reel knew this even if New York's Finest didn't.

She stood shoulder to shoulder with a crowd of people just beyond the official barricades. She watched the police methodically working, covering every inch of ground around where the body had fallen.

Reel looked at the same ground and her mind started to fill in blanks that the police didn't even know existed.

The target was what it was. A monster who needed killing.

That didn't interest Reel at all. She had killed many monsters. Others took their place. That was how the world worked. All you could do was try to keep slightly ahead in the count.

She was focused on other things. Things the police could not see.

She lined up the taped outline of the body on the trail with trajectory patterns in all directions. She was sure the police had already done that, Forensics 101 after all. But soon thereafter, their deductive ability and even their imagination would reach their professional limits, and thus they would never arrive at the right answer.

For her part, Reel knew that anything was possible. So after exhausting all other possibilities and performing her own mental algorithms to figure the shooter's position, she focused on a stone wall. A seemingly impenetrable stone wall. One could not fire through such an obstacle. And the doorway in the place that was surrounded by the stone wall had no sight line to the target. And it was no doubt securely locked. Thus the police would have discounted it immediately.

Reel left the crowd and started a long sweeping walk that angled her first to the west, then north, and finally east.

She drew out a pair of binoculars and focused them on the wall.

One would have to have two holes. One for the muzzle allowing for the greater width of the suppressor sleeve. And one for the scope.

Reel knew precisely where and how large those holes would need to be.

She worked the thumbwheel on her optics. The wall came into sharper focus. Reel looked at two areas of the wall, one higher than the other, both located in mortar seams.

The police would never see it because they would never be looking for it.

But Reel was.

There was no surveillance camera that she could see pointed at the wall. Why would there be? It

was simply a wall.

Which made it perfect.

And on that wall were two patches of mortar that were a slightly different color, as though they had been more recently applied than their neighbors. And they had been, Reel knew.

As soon as the shot was fired the holes would be refilled. The hardening compound would work its magic. For some hours, even some days afterward, the coloration would be slightly, ever so slightly, different. And then it would look just like the rest.

The shot had come from there.

The escape would have also come from there.

Reel looked down at the ground.

Maintenance shed. Pipes, tunnels.

Underneath the park was a maze of tunnels—water, sewer, and abandoned subway tracks. Reel knew this for a fact. It had figured into one of her kills years ago. So many places to run and hide under America's largest city. Millions of people above were jostling for space, while down below you could be as alone as though you were on the surface of the moon.

Reel began to walk again after putting her binoculars away.

The exit would have probably been in some far-off part of the city. Then the shooter would rise up to street level. A quick ride to the airport or train station and that would be it.

The killer goes free.

The victim goes to the morgue.

The papers would cover it for a while. There might be some geopolitical retaliation somewhere, and then the story would die. Other stories would take its place. One death meant little. The world was too big. And too many people were dying violent deaths to focus for long on any one of them.

Reel walked toward a hotel where she had reserved a room. She would hit the gym to work the kinks out, sit in the steam shower, have a bit of supper, and think about things.

The jaunt to Central Park had not been without purpose.

Will Robie was one of the best, if not the best they had.

Reel had no doubt that Robie had pulled the trigger that morning in Central Park. He had covered his tracks. Made his way aboveground. Taken a plane to D.C. Checked back in at the office.

All routine, or as routine as things got in Robie's world.

In my world too. But not anymore. Not after Doug Jacobs. The only report they'll want about me now is my autopsy results.

Reel was fairly sure Robie would be summoned for another mission.

His mission will be to track me down and kill me.

You send a killer to catch another killer.

Robie versus Reel. Nice ring to it.

It sounded like the fight of the century.

And she was certain it would be.

IT WAS RAINING OUTSIDE. There was no window in the room, but Robie could hear the drops hitting the roof. The weather had turned chilly in the last twenty-four hours. Winter was not here yet, but it was knocking on the door.

Robie put one palm on the table and continued to stare at Blue Man.

Obviously, Blue Man was not his real name. It was Roger Walton, but Blue Man would be the only way Robie would ever refer to him. It had to do with the man's high-level position—in the Blue Ring, to be precise. There were rings above Blue, but not many.

He looked like a grandfather. Silver hair, lengthening jowls, round glasses, immaculate suit, red paisley tie, old-fashioned collar pin, shined wingtips.

Yes, Blue Man was indeed high up in the agency. He and Robie had worked together before. Robie trusted Blue Man more than he trusted most folks here. The list of people Robie trusted was quite short.

“Jessica Reel?” said Robie.

Blue Man nodded.

“We're sure?”

“Jacobs was her handler. Jacobs was carrying out a mission with Reel. But Jacobs was shot instead of the target. We subsequently determined that Reel was not even in the vicinity of the target. It was all a sham.”

“Why kill Jacobs?”

“We don't know that. What we do know is Reel has gone off the grid.”

“You have proof she killed Jacobs? Maybe she's dead and someone else did it.”

“No. It was Reel's voice on the line with Jacobs right before the shot was taken. Jacobs would have had no idea where in the world she was. She would sound the same whether she was a thousand feet or a thousand miles away.” He paused. “We performed a shot trajectory analysis. Reel made the kill shot from an old town house down the street from where Jacobs was working.”

“No bulletproof windows in the place?”

“There will be now. But the blinds were drawn and the building is protected against electronic surveillance. The shooter had to know the exact layout of Jacobs's office to make that hit, because otherwise they were shooting blind.”

“Any evidence at the town house?”

“Not really. If Reel was there she policed her brass.”

Well, she would, wouldn't she, thought Robie. That's what we're trained to do, if we have the chance.

Blue Man tapped his finger on the table. It seemed to be in rhythm with the raindrops. “You knew Reel?”

Robie nodded. He knew that question was going to come up and was surprised it hadn't already. "Came up through the ranks together, so to speak. Did a few missions with her early on."

"And your thoughts on the woman?"

"She didn't talk a lot, which was okay with me because I didn't either. She did her job and she did it well. I never had any concerns with her covering my back. I believed she would go on to do first-rate work."

"She did, until this," noted Blue Man. "She's still the only female operative we've ever had."

"Out there gender doesn't mean anything," replied Robie. "So long as you can shoot straight under pressure. So long as you can do your job."

"What else?"

"We never shared anything personal about each other," said Robie. "It was not a bonding experience. We weren't in the military. We knew we would not be working together long-term."

"How long ago was this?"

"Last mission was well over ten years ago."

"Did you ever doubt her patriotism?"

"I never really thought about it. I figured if she had gotten that far the question of her loyalty would have been settled."

Blue Man nodded thoughtfully.

Robie said, "So why am I here? Just gathering intel on Reel from the people who knew her? You'll find others hopefully who knew her better than I did."

"That's not the only reason," said Blue Man.

The doorknob turned and another man entered the room.

Blue Man was near the top of the agency food chain. This man was even more highly situated than that. Robie would not refer to him by a color.

Jim Gelder was the number two man here. His boss, the director of central intelligence, testified before Congress, went to all the parties, did the D.C. song and dance, and fought for more budget dollars.

Gelder did everything else, meaning he basically ran the place, or at least the clandestine operations part of it, which many considered the most important.

He was in his late forties, but looked older. He had once been trim but had become thick around the middle. His hair was thinning rapidly and his face bore extensive sun damage. Not unusual for a man who had started out in the Navy, where an overabundance of wind, sun, and salt was an occupational hazard. He was as tall as Robie, but seemed larger still.

He glanced at Blue Man, who nodded back deferentially.

Gelder fell into a chair opposite Robie, sat back, unbuttoned his off-the-rack suit, and slid a hand through his graying hair. He cleared his throat and said, "Have you been brought up to speed?"

"For the most part," said Robie.

He had never been in Gelder's presence before. He didn't feel intimidated, only curious. Robie never felt intimidated by anyone unless the person had gotten the drop on him with a weapon. And that almost never happened.

"Jessica Reel," said Gelder. "Shitstorm."

"I've told what I know about her. And it's not much."

Gelder picked at a bit of jagged nail on his right thumb. Robie noted that the other nails were bitten down to the quick. Not a comforting feeling since he was the number two intelligence man in the country. But Robie knew the man had a lot to worry about. The world was one catalyst away from

blowing up.

Gelder had risen to lieutenant commander in the Navy before transferring over to the spy side. It had been a springboard for a fast-rising career, culminating in his current position. It was widely known that he could have had the number one slot but didn't want it. He liked to do things, but kissing Congress's ass was not one of them.

"We have to get her," said Gelder. "Alive or dead. Alive, preferably, so we can find out what the hell happened."

"I can see that," said Robie. "I'm sure you have a plan to do just that."

Blue Man looked at Gelder. Gelder glanced up at Robie.

"Well, actually, *you're* the plan, Robie," said Gelder.

Robie did not look at Blue Man, though he could feel the man's gaze now on him. "You want me to go after Reel?" he said slowly. This scenario had never occurred to him and he suddenly wondered why not.

Gelder nodded.

"I'm not a detective," said Robie. "That's not my strength."

Blue Man looked at him. "I would disagree with you on that point, Robie."

"But regardless, send a killer to find a killer," said Gelder simply.

"You have lots of them on the payroll," Robie replied.

Gelder stopped picking his nail. "You come highly recommended."

"Why? Because of what happened recently?"

"We would be derelict in our duties if we ignored that," said Gelder. "You're just coming off an assignment. I think you can be better deployed tracking down Reel."

"Do I have a choice?"

Gelder stared across at him. "Is there a problem?"

"Despite what you said, I don't think I'm the right man for the job."

In answer Gelder slipped a small square electronic tablet from his inside jacket pocket. He scrolled down some screens, reading as he did so.

"Well, let me give you some 'specifics' as to why you are the right man for the job. You graded first in your class with record marks. Two years later Jessica Reel was first in her class with a score that would have been a record but for yours."

"Yes, but—" Robie began, but Gelder put up a hand.

"In a practice scenario you were the only one to track her down and capture her."

"That was a long time ago. And it wasn't the real thing."

"And finally, you saved her life once."

"Why does that matter?" asked Robie.

"It might make her hesitate for a second, Robie. And that should be all you need." He added, "Not that I was required to provide an explanation for you to follow a *direct order*, but there you are. Consider it a gift under extraordinary circumstances."

He rose and glanced at Blue Man. "Keep me informed." He looked back at Robie. "As always, failure is not an option, Robie."

"And if I do fail I better die in the process, right?" said Robie.

Gelder looked at him as though he had merely stated the obvious.

The next moment the door opened and the number two man walked out through it. He closed the door behind him with the finality of a coffin lid shutting.

Blue Man glanced nervously at Robie, who was still staring at the door. Then Robie slowly looked

over at Blue Man.

“You knew about this?” Robie asked.

Blue Man nodded.

“And what do you think about it?”

“I think you are ideally suited for it.”

“Dead or alive? Was that bullshit or code or both?”

“I truly think they want her alive. She needs to be interrogated. She was one of our top operatives. We’ve never had one of them turn before.”

“Well, you know that’s not true. There seems to be a run on turncoats in the agency lately.”

Blue Man looked pained by this statement, but he could hardly dispute it in light of recent events.

“So that’s what you think this is? She was turned? So why kill Jacobs? Now we know she’s gone bad. It’s not like she can walk back into the job and start collecting valuable intel for her new employer. Doesn’t make sense.”

“It has to make sense in some way. Because it’s happened.”

Robie said, “Jacobs is dead. Reel is nowhere to be found. Her being turned is only one possibility. There are others.”

“Her voice was on that secure operations line along with Jacobs’s.”

“Still other possibilities.”

“And now you have the chance to explore them, Robie.”

“I’m assuming there is no opportunity to decline the assignment?”

Blue Man did not even bother to answer.

“The target left standing in the Middle East. It would seem that maybe he did the turning. Why not start there?”

“Tricky situation. Ferat Ahmadi is vying to fill the power vacuum in Syria. He has a lot of support on the ground. Unfortunately, he is a terrible choice as far as we are concerned. We’ve had a lot of trouble happening with the Arab Spring. Those countries are electing people who hate us to lead them.”

“Okay, but I take it the Chinese and Russians would not be happy that we’re picking winners and losers over there again,” commented Robie.

“The assassination attempt coming out would not be in our interests, no.”

“If it had gone according to plan, how was it going to be covered up?”

“Standard procedure. Blame it on opposition leaders to Ahmadi. Not a stretch by any means. They’ve tried to kill him twice. They’re just not very good at it. We were going to leave evidence behind that would lead back to one of them.”

“Two birds with one stone?”

Blue Man nodded. “We try to be efficient. That would leave a third party standing who we can at least attempt to talk sense to.”

“But that’s all been shut down now.”

“Yes, it has.”

Robie stood. “I’ll need whatever you have on Reel.”

“Being assembled as we speak.”

“Okay,” said Robie, but for him, right now, nothing was okay.

“What did you really think of Reel when you worked with her?”

“I already told you.”

“The unvarnished version.”

“She was as good as me. Maybe now she’s better. I don’t know. But it looks like I might find out.”

As he turned to leave Blue Man said, "We've had a run of bad luck lately, Robie."

"Yeah, I guess you could say that."

"I suppose that the longer you stay in service the greater the chance that someone will try and turn you," said Blue Man. He tapped his fingers on the table and looked off.

"The more years of service, the more value you might have."

Blue Man glanced over at him. "Others have been tempted. Successfully."

"A few out of many."

"Still a problem."

"Is it a problem for you?" asked Robie.

"No more than it is for you, I'm sure."

"Glad we got that straight." Robie walked out to begin his new assignment.

6

ROBIE DROVE THROUGH THE STREETS of D.C. with a USB stick in his coat pocket. On it was the career of Jessica Elyse Reel. Robie already knew some of it. By tomorrow he would know all of it, except for the parts yet to be filled in.

The rain was falling more steadily. D.C. in the rain was a curious spectacle. There were of course the monuments, the popular target of busloads of tourists, many of whom probably despised much about the federal city. But they came to gawk at the pretty structures, figuring their tax dollars had paid for them.

In the gloom the mighty Jefferson and Lincoln and Washington memorials and monument, respectively, seemed diminished to a grainy outline one would see on an aged, tattered postcard. The Capitol dome loomed large, towering over all other nearby structures. It was the place where Congress did—or increasingly did not do—its work. But even the enormity of the colossal dome seemed lessened in the rain.

Robie steered his Audi toward Dupont Circle. He had lived in an apartment near Rock Creek Park for years. Less than a month ago he had moved out. That had everything to do with one of his previous assignments. He simply couldn't stay there anymore.

Dupont was in the middle of town, full of nightlife, dozens of hip restaurants offering cuisines from around the world, esoteric retailers, highbrow booksellers, and retail shops that one could find nowhere else. It was exciting and energizing and a real asset to the city.

But Robie didn't crave the nightlife. When he ate out, he ate alone. He didn't shop in the hip shops. He didn't browse through the highbrow bookstores. When he walked the streets, which he often did, particularly later at night, he didn't seek out contact with others. He didn't welcome companionship at any level. There would have been little point to it, especially now.

He parked in the underground garage of his apartment building and took the elevator up to his floor. He inserted two keys into the twin locks—both deadbolts—on his apartment door. The alarm system beeped its warning. The beeps stopped when he disarmed it.

He took off his coat but didn't remove the USB stick. He walked to the window and stared down at the wet streets. Rain cleansed, or at least that was the theory. There were parts of this town that could never be clean, he thought. And not just the high-crime areas. He operated in the world of government power, and it was as dirty as the grimmest alley in the city.

He'd had a brush with normalcy recently. But it was just a brush. It hadn't stuck to him, and had eventually fallen away.

But it had left remnants.

He pulled out his wallet and removed the photo.

The girl in the picture was fourteen going on forty. Julie Getty. Small, skinny, straggly hair. Robie didn't care about her appearance. He admired her for her courage, her intelligence, and her spunk.

She had given him this photo of her when they had parted ways. He should never have kept it. It was too dangerous. It could lead back to her, yet Robie had still kept it. He simply didn't seem able to part with it.

Robie had never had children, and never would. If he had, Julie Getty would have been a daughter of whom he would have been proud. However, she wasn't his daughter. And she had a new life to lead. A life that he could not really be part of. That's just the way it was. It was not his choice.

He put the photo back in his wallet at the same time his cell phone buzzed.

At first he smiled when he saw who was calling, and then the smile turned to a frown. He debated whether to answer, but decided if he didn't she would just keep calling.

It was simply how she was wired.

"Hello?"

"Robie. Long time."

Nicole Vance was an FBI special agent. A super agent according to Julie Getty. Julie had also thought that Vance had a thing for Robie. In fact, she'd been sure of it.

Robie had never found that out for certain and wasn't sure he wanted to. Something in the recent past had turned him off to anything remotely resembling a relationship with a woman. It wasn't an issue of desire. It was one of trust. Without that, Robie couldn't muster the desire.

Robie was trained never to be deceived. Never to be played for a fool. Never to be left without a seat when the music stopped. And yet he had been deceived. It had been a humbling experience that he didn't care to repeat.

Vance's voice sounded the same. A little too amped up for Robie right now, but he had to admire the woman's energy.

"Yeah, it has been."

"You been traveling lately?"

He hesitated, wondering whether she had put the events in Central Park together with him.

Vance had a good idea of what Robie did professionally. As an FBI agent sworn to uphold and protect, she couldn't be privy to any more than she already knew. They operated in two distinct worlds, both necessary, both not mutually exclusive.

But both incompatible nonetheless. And if their jobs were incompatible, then so were they as individuals. Robie clearly saw that now. In fact, he had always known it.

"Not much. You?"

"Just the mean streets of D.C."

"So what's up?"

"You free for dinner?"

Robie again hesitated. He hesitated so long, in fact, that Vance finally said, "It's not that complicated, Robie. Either you are or you aren't. No skin off here if you say no."

Robie wanted to say no. But for some reason he said, "When?"

"Around eight? I've been wanting to try this new place over on Fourteenth." She told him the name. "I hear they strain their tomatoes through linen cloths to make their cocktails."

"You like cocktails that much?" he asked.

"Tonight I do."

Robie knew there had to be an ulterior reason for Vance to be calling him to go to dinner. Yes, he believed that she liked him. But she was super agent Vance for a good reason. She never turned it off.

"Okay," he said.

"Just like that?"

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