

THE PRESIDENT'S ASSASSIN



A NOVEL

BRIAN HAIG

AUTHOR OF THE KINGMAKER AND PRIVATE SECTOR

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Also by Brian Haig

Secret Sanction

Mortal Allies

The Kingmaker

Private Sector

With love to:
Lisa
Brian, Patrick, Donnie, and Annie

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CHAPTER ONE

SETTLING INTO THE BACKSEAT OF THE CAR, I MENTIONED TO THE ATTRACTIVE young lady seated beside me, “That’s a lovely pistol you’re carrying.”

No reply.

“The accessorized holster’s nice, too.”

“Well...they’re FBI issue.”

“No kidding. Ever shoot anybody with it?”

“Not yet.” She gave me a brief glance. “You might be my first.”

From her accent she was from the Midwest, Ohio, someplace like that. From her tone and demeanor, she meant it. Neither she nor the gentlemen in the front smiled, offered hands, or appeared in any way pleased to have me as a passenger.

So to break the ice, I said, “I’m Sean Drummond.”

She said, “Keep quiet.”

“Nice morning, isn’t it?”

She gave me an annoyed look and stared out the window.

“Where are we going?” I asked her.

“I’m trying to think. Shut up.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Well...you’re not paying attention to the answer you’re getting.”

We were in the backseat of an unmarked black sedan with two plainclothes types in front. I said, “You guys know where we’re going?”

The one in the passenger seat glanced sideways at his partner. “Yeah.”

As I mentioned, I’m Sean Drummond, an Army major and a JAG attorney, and for all I knew these three were goombahs and we were on our way to the nearest marsh for a quick whack. Well, probably not—though I think the lady was tempted. We had just departed the front gate of CIA headquarters and turned right onto Dolley Madison, headed west toward McLean. No lights or sirens were turned on, but the driver kicked it up to about seventy, which I regarded as interesting fact number one.

I knew the lady’s name was Jennifer Margold; I knew she was a special agent from the D.C. Metro Field Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and probably she wouldn’t be in the backseat of this car were she not good at something. Early to mid-thirties, shoulder-length coppery hair, slender, and as I mentioned, attractive—not beautiful, more like pretty in an interesting way.

She looked bright, and wore a dark pantsuit with practical pumps, light on the makeup, and heavy on the bitchiness, if you ask me. Also, for fieldwork Fibbies prefer what she was not wearing:—bulletproof vests, blue windbreakers, and baseball caps. I regarded this as interesting fact number two. Her eyes, incidentally, were a sort of frosted blue, like chilled cobalt.

I should also mention that I wasn't attired in a uniform or anything, but a blue serge suit, which was both stylish and appropriate, as my current assignment had nothing to do with the Army or law. Actually, I was new to this job. In fact, I wasn't really sure what my job was. I said to the driver, "I'd really appreciate it if you'd pull over at the nearest Starbucks."

He laughed.

I said, "Come on, guy. I'll buy. You all look like mocha latte types."

Agent Margold replied, "I told you, shut up."

Anyway, I was on loan—or maybe banished—to something innocuously titled the Office of Special Projects, part of the Central Intelligence Agency, though I wasn't working at the Langley headquarters but somewhere called an offsite—a nondescript large red-brick warehouse in Crystal City with a sign over the entrance that read "Ferguson Home Security Electronics."

You'd think that would be enough of a front, but the Agency has a classified budget, which is an invitation for extravagant idiocy. Three or four red delivery vans were parked out front, and there were actually a few guys whose job it was to drive them around all day, and even more guys who were supposed to pop in and out and pose like customers. There was even a receptionist out front named Lila to handle the occasional rube who dropped in looking for a home alarm or something. But she's okay. She's very friendly. Also, she's really pretty.

The CIA is really into this smoke-and-mirrors stuff. I mean, how much simpler would it be to just slap up a sign that read "VD Clinic"? No more vans and no more phony customers, and for sure there'd be no casual foot traffic. I actually submitted this recommendation on my second day on the job. But I already knew the response. These people have big-time image issues. For an agency charged with national security, they're really insecure.

Anyway, after only a mile or so we turned left onto a street called Ballantrae Farm Drive, a sort of suburban block filled with Pepsident monstrosities. McLean, if you're interested, is one of Washington's more elite suburbs, with no shortage of posh enclaves for the rich and privileged. Still, I could picture a Realtor taking a prospective couple to this block saying something like, "But since you said money is no object, I wanted to be sure you saw this lovely neighborhood."

We continued our drive down the street and eventually we reached a cul-de-sac, and it wasn't hard to guess that the big shack with the three Crown Vics at the curb was our destination. Two guys in suits stood guard at the front entrance, and they weren't holding welcome signs.

You saw that house and you knew—all red brick with tall, thick Corinthian stone columns in front, slate-roofed, and if I had to estimate, about fifteen thousand square feet of interior grandiosity and pomposity, pool out back, cabana, and all that.

We climbed out of the backseat, and one of the guys in suits promptly approached. He seemed to know Special Agent Margold, because he said, "Everybody's inside, Jennie. It's ugly. Director's still ten minutes out." He handed her a clipboard and she signed in, name, time, date, whatever.

Presumably he was referring to Mark Townsend, the head of the Federal Bureau, which told you these clowns were also Fibbies. Not that I have anything against the FBI. I actually admire what they do and how well they do it. It's *how* they do it. A lot of FBI types are lawyers and accountants, and when you turn them into law enforcement agents you get this weird culture and this sort of hybrid personality, or maybe a hyphenated personality. They're so insufferable, they better be good.

Also, jurisdiction's always a touchy issue with law enforcement types. Aside from the aforementioned government sedans and federal agents, I saw no ambulances, no ME wagon, no forensics van, nor had anybody strung up any yellow crime scene tape. This was interesting fact number three.

Interesting fact number four was the absence of uniformed or local cops, the usual first responders. So whatever occurred inside that house was being kept strictly federal, a synonym for serious, and was being handled low-key, which often rhymes with messy, or, more often, embarrassing.

Margold handed the clipboard back to the guy, who asked me, "Who're you?"

"Building inspector."

He did not respond. I asked, "You the termite guy?"

He smiled tightly. "I'd like to see your ID before you sign in."

Actually, when I was pulled out of the shower by a 7:09 A.M. phone call from my boss, the only instructions she could offer over an open line were to be sure not to sign the crime log, and nobody but Agent Margold was authorized to know my true identity. She also mentioned that to preserve my anonymity, I should curb my tart tongue and watch my manners, whatever that means.

In my few short weeks with these clandestine types, the one thing I'd learned is that what is said rarely is all that is meant. You have to read between the lines. Don't sign in means we don't want you getting subpoenaed later. Don't identify yourself means it would be inconvenient to have a witness on the stand recalling your presence. So I was being neither coy nor rude when I told him, "Seriously, if you show me your ID I'll have to kill you."

He said, "Seriously...if you don't, I might kill you."

Agent Margold stepped in and informed the guy, "He's authorized. I'll keep an eye on him."

"He *has* to sign in, Jennie."

"Trust me, he doesn't. If you get backlash, refer it to me."

She stared him down with those icy blue eyes, and reluctantly he allowed us to pass. Whatever happened inside this house this fine spring morning had these people so tightassed it would take a month of Metamucil to clear their pipes. But we progressed together, she and I, up the driveway and then along a walkway to the grand front entrance. She paused at the doorway, slipped white paper booties over her shoes, slapped latex gloves on her hands, and, speaking out the side of her mouth, said to me, "It's apparent that you have authority issues. If I get the slightest problem from you, Drummond, I'll slap your ass in handcuffs and have you carted out." She handed shoe covers and gloves to me and added, "Stay beside me, keep your smartassed mouth shut, and don't touch a thing. You're here to observe, period."

Goodness. I tucked my tail between my legs and replied, "You're right. I'm glad you brought this to my attention, and I'm truly sorry. You have my word, I'll be more responsive, helpful, and obedient."

Actually, I didn't say that. I slipped on my booties and gloves and asked, "You going in first?"

And without further ado, we entered a cavernous foyer with white marble floors and, to the left, a sweeping curved stairway, and on the ceiling above, a massive crystal chandelier. As I was here to observe, period, I also took note of the oriental chest against the far wall, the handwoven Chinese rug centered neatly in the foyer, and the corpse about five feet from the door.

The corpse—a female, late twenties, and in admirable physical shape, ignoring her present condition. She was dressed in a nice navy blue suit with a plain jacket and short skirt and was lying on her back, hands clutched at her throat with her knees bent and her legs spread wide apart, so you could see her pink undies; though modesty was no longer a concern for her. Both the position of her hands

and the halo of blood around her head suggested she'd been shot in the throat. The blood looked dark, indicating an artery had been nicked, and the fact that it was only partially dry that she'd gotten it around the time I should've been having my morning joe.

She looked like a broken rag doll that had gotten caught in a big wind and tossed on her butt. But that's not what happened—she'd taken a frontal shot from a slug with enough throw weight to fling her five feet through the air.

I don't think Ms. Margold missed the corpse, though she ignored it and walked on. Also, she had either been in this house before or had been briefed on the layout, because she led me straight through a large living room and directly to the dining room, and more corpses.

More precisely, an elderly man and woman were seated at each end of the dining table, slumped forward, facedown in the soup—or to be completely precise, their faces were in soup bowls, filled with Cheerios for him and Frosted Flakes for her.

The man was about mid-sixties, white-haired, attired in a gray pinstriped light wool business suit, white shirt, and shiny black tasseled loafers. An expensive black leather briefcase was parked beside his left foot, like he was about to leave for work, though obviously that didn't pan out. The woman was about his age, red-haired, and she wore pink pajamas under a blue silk dressing gown, as if she expected to be eating in front of strangers, though from the scene at the table, probably not the strangers who dropped by.

Agent Margold moved directly to the male victim's body, felt his neck very briefly, and backed off. I noticed, to our right, nearly in the corner, two agents leaning against the wall who did not seem to be doing much of anything. But maybe they weren't supposed to. She suggested to them, “What...maybe two hours?”

The heavier one nodded. “An ME's on the way. But yeah...when we arrived thirty minutes ago, he was still real warm. Time of death between six and seven o'clock. Closer to six, I think.”

She walked around and examined the room a moment. The table was long and thick, custom-made obviously, able to seat about fourteen. The room itself was expansive and expensively furnished, and the lady of the house was a finicky housekeeper and possessed good decorating taste, or she hired good help. Fresh bouquets of flowers rested on the fireplace mantel and a large centerpiece sat on the middle of the table, suggesting, I thought, that she and the hubby might've entertained recently.

But maybe they weren't husband and wife. You have to be careful about assumptions at a murder scene. The dead guy could be her lover, her tax accountant, or her killer. Also, the two gents by the wall kept glancing at the male corpse and largely ignored the woman. As a general rule, all corpses are relevant to a crime, and perhaps not in life but in death, all bodies become equal. Yet in most multiple murders, one corpse is the main event and the rest are simply victims of the three Ws—wrong place, wrong time, wrong company. I wondered if the young lady in the foyer was their daughter.

We all contemplated the corpses for a moment. Margold asked, “Who was the first responder?”

Again the heavier guy responded, “Danny Cavuso. Works out of the Tysons Corner cell. Because of proximity to the residence, the Tysons office is on standby for problems. A telephonic check was supposed to be made every morning when Hawk left for work. When no call came by six-thirty, a call was made here. No answer. So Cavuso was dispatched.”

“Alone?”

“Andy Warshuski from his office was his backup. The front door was unlocked. They swept the house and grounds, and called in the incident. When we arrived, they left together.”

“So they're the only two who departed the site?”

“Except the killers.”

“Keep it that way. Complete quarantine. Nobody departs unless I say so.”

He replied, “Already got that word,” and she returned to her visual inspection, leaving me to ponder an interesting fact number five. Perhaps she was worried about forensics getting disqualifying foot- and fingerprints from everybody who entered the house. Or perhaps I was missing something important.

Anyway, lawyers are not forensic experts, but eight years of criminal law does afford a few skills and insights. The right side of the man’s head had a small entry hole—dead center in the temple—although I couldn’t yet observe an exit wound, the gray-and-red mess splattered on the expensive wallpaper suggested the bullet had passed through cleanly. I moved around a bit, formed a mental image of the male victim alive and seated upright. The shot had been fired flat and level, I decided, as if the shooter positioned the gun right next to the guy’s temple, and boom. But more likely the killer had taken the shooter’s crouch and fired from a distance, which accounted for the level trajectory. The lady of the house had taken her bullet in the right rear quadrant of her neck. From the debris splattered messily across the near side of the table, the shooter had stood slightly to her right rear with the weapon sighted slightly downward. I made a mental note to think about that.

That the bullet had passed cleanly through the male’s head rather than ricocheting around the skull as so often happens, suggested a powerful weapon. And from the way the lady back at the front door had been flung backward, you knew it was more than a .22, certainly, though I thought the size of the entry wound in the man’s temple indicated something smaller than a .45.

I walked around and visually checked the exit wound of the male victim. The whole side and rear quadrant of his skull was missing, too large a hole for a .38, unless the bullet had been a hollowpoint or been modified in some nasty way to boost the tissue damage. The bullet had to be lodged in the wall—good news for the ballistics folks.

Also, the attack had come as a complete surprise to the couple at the table. That was obvious. Neither victim had tried to stand up or fend off the attack, or had even acknowledged their killer. Like “Could you please pass the sugar, Martha,” then—*bang*—“Augh.” No, actually, more like, “Martha, could you pass another slice of that delicious toast?” “Of course, dear, and would you—” *bang, bang*—Augh, Augh.

Special Agent Margold appeared to be in a hurry, because after only a cursory inspection, she asked, “How do we get to the basement?”

The skinnier agent said, “Back by the kitchen. Second door on the right. Ben Marcasi’s down there.”

She glanced at me and said, somewhat curtly, “Come along.”

So I came along.

We went through a short passage to the hallway and found the second door on the right. As we walked, I tried to piece together why the Agency was on the hook for this thing, and more selfishly, why was Sean Drummond on the hook for anything? From the looks of things and the presence of the Bureau I ruled out the ordinary stuff: burglary, drug deal gone sour, and so on. In fact, what happened inside that dining room looked like an execution. There had been no conversation between victims and killers, no argument over money, no vengeful message, no negotiation, not even an exchange of good-byes.

Generalizations, like assumptions, can be misleading, yet it’s a fact that executions nearly always are the tradecraft of mobsters and drug gangs. Both like to regard murder as just business, a swift and elegant way to settle a dispute, end a partnership, or terminate a misbehaving employee. But wiseguys would bring in only the Feds, and drug gangs might draw in the DEA but should not concern the CIA. A blown witness-protection thing? That could involve the Agency if the victim was a witness in an

international terrorism case, I guess. So that was a possibility. Or was the dead guy at the table a CIA employee? Maybe this was some weird courtesy thing between federal agencies: Hey, one of your guys got whacked this morning—want to come see?

I smelled coffee as we passed the kitchen. For some reason, the odor sent a chill down my spine. Not three hours before three people awakened, never realizing they were dressing for the last time, sharing their final breakfast. Sad. So I followed Agent Margold down the stairs and into the basement and at the bottom of the steps she yelled, “Ben!...Ben!...”

“Back here,” a voice replied.

The basement was large with a high ceiling, essentially a spacious, open room with tan wall-to-wall, no sliding doors, no exterior entrances, not even windows. It was more casual and sparsely furnished than upstairs, and there was a feeling like it didn’t see much use, but in the far right corner spotted a tidy pile of toys; an Erector set, two balls, a toy truck, and so forth.

Like that, the couple upstairs were no longer clinical clue magnets; they were now Grandma and Grandpa, they took the grandkiddies to the Smithsonian and remembered all their birthdays, and their murder became more than an incident: It became a tragedy for some family and a matter of more than passing interest for me. Wondering if Margold’s mood reflected some personal connection, I asked, “Did you know these people?”

She faced me and said, “Open your mouth again and you’re gone.”

We were getting along famously.

Anyway, we proceeded to a door and entered a small room that, from the condition of the drywall and unmarred whitewash, appeared to be a recent addition.

A heavyset middle-aged male stood in the middle of the floor, running his hands through his balding hair, and he turned to face us as we entered. The absence of other living beings in the room indicated this would be Ben. The room—small and claustrophobic, because in addition to Ben were some ten wall-mounted video monitors, a high-tech communications console, a brown Naugahyde lounge chair, and a single bed in the far corner. Also, strewn here and about, three additional corpses.

Nearest to the door and us sat a young woman who had taken three or four slugs on the right side of her body. She was seated in an office chair at the comms console, her body pitched to the left, her right hand stretched toward the console, and it struck me she might’ve been reaching for something when she got popped. The other two corpses were males, late twenties and mid-thirties, wearing wrinkled gray suits and more bullet holes.

The younger of the two men had removed his jacket and was prone on the bed, and if you ignored the small hole in his right temple and the splatter of skull viscera on the far wall, the expression on his face was weirdly placid and content—arms crossed, feet crossed; his sleep had turned permanent without so much as a whimper.

The second male corpse was seated on the lounge chair, jacket slung over the chair back, eyes wide open, and his expression, not placid, was a mixture of shock and agony. His fingers were clutched at his throat, just like the lady at the door, where he’d also been shot. If you didn’t know better, you’d think he’d had a heart attack. In a way he had. They all had.

Another thing got my attention. The dead guy on the bed had removed not only his jacket but also his holster containing a Glock automatic. A matching holster and Glock pistol were still hooked to the belt of his dead partner. I eliminated my CIA employee theory and leaned toward the blown witness theory. “Who are these people?” I asked Margold.

Margold was busy feeling the neck of the young lady at the console and said, “Shut up” to me, and then to Ben, “Roughly same time of death as the others.”

“Yeah.” After a long moment, he noted, “Nearly simulta neous.”

“Same weapon as upstairs, right?”

“Uh...maybe. Same caliber. I’m thinking a thirty-eight.”

“About. Had to be a silencer.”

“Had to be,” he agreed. After a moment, he said to her, “Can you reconstruct yet?”

“Yeah...it’s pretty straightforward. Who’s at the front door?”

“June Lacy.” He added, “Been with us three years. From upstate Minnesota, I think...engaged to get married next week.”

“Uh-huh. What time did Hawk’s driver arrive?”

“Same time every morning, 6:15. Name’s Larry Elwood. Anyway, Larry’d pull into the driveway, leave the car idling, come to the front door, and June, or whoever was on shift, took over from there.”

Agent Margold was examining a clipboard on the console, apparently a security log, because she said, “The entry’s right here. Six-twenty, Elwood arrived.” She looked at Ben. “‘Took over from there’? What’s that mean?”

“The team had a morning routine. June would roust the Hawk out. She’d escort him out to the car, and Elwood drove him in. The Hawk liked to be at his desk at 6:45 sharp, even on Saturdays. You can tell by the condition of the house the man was a stickler...We got serious heat if we threw him off schedule.”

“So that’s what happened,” Margold replied after a moment. “Elwood—at least someone who *looked* like Elwood—pulled into the driveway, came to the door, rang the bell, only this time, when Lacy answered, she took it in the throat.” She added, “Nothing arbitrary about that throat shot. Drowned out her warning.”

Ben nodded. “I just reviewed the tape. The car pulled up at 6:20. Like you said—five minutes late. And you’re right, a guy who looks like Elwood walked directly to the front door. Obviously, the cameras only canvass the exterior, though.”

“Yeah, well...it’s fairly obvious what happened inside. After he killed Lacy, he stepped inside, capped the Hawk and his wife, then rushed down here and did these three.” She pointed at the bank of monitors. “Let’s see the tape.”

I didn’t think it was that obvious, but Ben raised no objections, nor did I. Ben moved to the console, pointed to one of the monitors, pushed a few buttons, and rewound till you could see the time was 6:19. He pushed play, and after about thirty seconds a shiny black Lincoln Town Car with impenetrably darkened windows crossed in front of the house and pulled up the driveway, not stopping till it was nearly to the garage door. A male got out, walked to the front of the car, then you lost him for a few seconds as he crossed the front of the car, but he reappeared as he headed up the walkway to the entrance. The camera lost his image again when he walked under the overhang supported by the concrete columns. So you couldn’t observe what happened at the door, though from June Lacy’s corpse, you knew *what* happened, just not how.

The driver, Larry Elwood, wore a dark suit, was heavysset and black. One of those silly chauffeur’s hats with a visor obscured his face. Also he walked slowly, almost haltingly, and slightly hunched over, like he had a stomach cramp or was trying to work a kink out of a bum leg. Or perhaps as though he was hiding his face, disguising his physical appearance from the camera.

Margold picked up on it, too, because she asked Ben, “You’re positive that’s Elwood?”

“Looks like him. Hell, though, I’m not sure of anything.”

I suggested, “Maybe there was more than one of them.”

Ben asked, “Who’s he?”

I asked, "Who're you?"

"Ben Marcasi." He turned to Agent Margold and again asked, "Who the hell's he?"

Margold looked at me. "I thought I warned you to keep your mouth shut."

"Right. Just, you know...forget what I said."

But obviously she couldn't forget what I said. She informed me, "Ben's Secret Service...the deputy chief of the White House security detail." She waved an arm around. "This house falls under his supervision. These are his people."

Goodness. It all came into focus—the poop was hitting the fan, and clearly they knew it. What wasn't at all clear was *who* had died upstairs, and what I was doing in range of the splatter.

So to clarify that first point, I asked, "And the dead guy upstairs...Mr. Hawk?"

"A code name. The deceased male upstairs is Terry Belknap...White House Chief of Staff." But she obviously wasn't interested in providing more insights or information. She asked me, "Why do you think there were two shooters?"

"Did I say *only* two?"

"I don't...uh, okay, two or more. Why?"

I allowed her a moment to digest her own question before I suggested, "You understand that the couple upstairs were shot nearly simultaneously, right? He was facing his wife and he took it in the right temple. The geometry suggests his shooter fired from the living room entry into the dining room. Had the same shooter nailed Mrs. Belknap, the bullets would've struck her in the front or possibly left frontal lobe. But the Mrs. was facing the Mr. and she took it in the rear left quadrant of her neck. Ergo, a second shooter popped her from the kitchen entry into the dining room."

Agent Margold nodded and said, "You could be right. But there are—"

"Not could be...It's a fact."

"All right..."

"That's two shooters who gained entry. If they found a way to get two inside, why not three? Or four? Lacy opens the front door and takes it in the throat. Two, three, or four guys race in. One moves to the living room, one to the kitchen. The third and maybe the fourth sneak down here."

Margold said, "Let's entertain your theory for a moment. They've got some kind of signaling device—radios maybe—and as you suggested, they launch their attacks simultaneously." She walked over to the dead guy in the lounge chair. "He's armed, he's alert, he's facing the door...he gets it first. Then her, before she can push the central alarm," she said, indicating the dead lady at the comms console. "The sleeper, he's harmless...he gets it last."

"Nope," said Ben, shaking his head. "Not only are cameras covering the whole exterior of this house, there's also motion detectors. No way you could get even *one* person approaching undetected. Couldn't happen."

After pondering Ben's blanket assurance, I asked, "No blind spots?"

"Glad you asked—none. Cameras cover the full backyard, the house flanks, and there's two roving cameras mounted high on the columns in the front that give you a panorama of *everything* approaching this house." He pointed at the monitors. "You saw yourself—driveway, lawn, street out front...everything's covered."

I noted, "I saw a blind spot against the front wall of the house."

"Well, yeah. The cameras had to be mounted on the columns. But we were aware of that. So that space is covered with movement sensors."

"Radar or light beams?" I asked.

"Radar. I oversaw the security architecture and installation myself. One detector spaced every five

feet. Foolproof.”

Wrong answer, Ben. I asked, “And what happens when two or three bodies breach a beam—simultaneously?”

“That’s imposs—”

“Like, they’re walking in a line, so they all hit the beam at once?” I knew the answer, actually. But sometimes the Socratic method works best.

Ben paused. He then gave the only answer he could give. “Theoretically, you might get one alert.”

“So this Elwood guy pulls into the driveway—and one, two, or three other guys are inside the car with him. He gets out; they get out. They stay low, using the car as a visual screen from the cameras till they get to the blind spot by the garage door. They get right against the front wall of the house, inside the blind spot, and move in lockstep with Elwood.” After a short pause, I added, “And because the folks down here observe what they think is Elwood moving alone on the walkway, they assume it’s him making the movement detectors go off.”

The room was suddenly quiet. I asked, “Is that a possible scenario?”

Poor Ben looked like he just understood he was about to have a big career problem. “I...I don’t think so.”

Margold looked at me, then at Ben, then at the three corpses in the tiny room. She said, “Ben...we better check.”

So we trudged back upstairs, through the long hallway and the spacious foyer, past poor Lacy’s body, and onto the front entry. Neatly trimmed bushes and shrubbery were up against the front wall of the house, and there was a thick strip of mulch separating the bushes from the well-manicured lawn. But once you knew what you were looking for, and at, the disturbances in the garden mulch jumped out at you. Ben bent forward at the waist and gawked. After an awkward moment, he insisted, “That proves nothing. Could’ve been a gardener or a wild animal made those tracks.”

I suggested to Margold, “They’re footprints. You should definitely get molds before it rains.”

Margold’s nostrils sort of flared. “I’ll decide how to do my job, if you don’t mind.” She contemplated the mulch, then pointed at me and snapped, “You...let’s have a word.”

We walked, she and I, to the end of the driveway, far enough to be out of Ben’s earshot. She studied my face and asked, “Who the hell are you?”

“Nobody. Forget I was here. Now, if you’ll please tell your people to give me a lift, I’d like to go back to my office. Incidentally, it was really swell working with you. Tough case. Best of luck.”

“Look...in case you haven’t noticed, six people are dead inside that house. Including the White House Chief of Staff.”

“I noticed. Do I need to walk out of here?” Okay, I was being a little over the top. And maybe Margold’s testiness that morning was justified, as she had obviously been shoved in front of a moving train. But she had rubbed my face in the crap, and what goes around, comes around.

She said, “You’re staying. Don’t pretend otherwise.”

Also, I was thinking on my feet. I had no idea why my boss dispatched me to this gig, and if I stayed I’d only sink deeper into the muck. Mrs. Drummond had not raised a complete idiot, and I now knew that what had happened inside that big house was the form of execution subtitled a political assassination. Mention that phrase in the CIA and people go all pale and sweaty on you. The next thing you know, some idiot named Oliver Stone’s making a movie with a character named Drummond. I said, “You’re the FBI. You’re great—handle it.”

Ms. Margold ignored me and began talking about the seriousness of this thing and so forth. I tuned her out.

In fact, I was sure this was why my boss had ordered me to keep a low profile. The Agency did not want to be within ten miles of this thing. Actually, the Agency headquarters was only two miles down the road, so I should walk fast.

Apparently Margold saw she had lost my attention, because she swallowed and said, “Okay, I get it. Look...well, I’m sorry if I was...a little brusque earlier.”

“A little *what*?”

“Okay...I was rude. Nothing personal.”

“Bullshit. You’re worried because you’ve got the murder of the year on your hands. The Lord of the Feeds will be here any minute, and you caught the rap. You’re supposed to show you’re on top of this thing and explain what happened here, yet for some reason no ME or forensics people have arrived, the first guys on the scene are standing around with their thumbs up their butts, Ben’s worried about covering his ass, and it suddenly struck you that you’re all alone with your ass on the line. So I say something bright and enlightening, and you decide I might be helpful. Also, you’d like somebody to help catch the crap when it flies. Thanks. Get me a ride out of here.”

Her jaw muscles tensed a bit, but she kept her cool. Actually, she smiled. “You’re more alert and intuitive than I gave you credit for, Drummond.”

“Are you going to get me a ride?”

“But you’re not leaving.”

“Wrong. Says so in the federal statutes—CIA handles assholes outside, FBI handles assholes inside. It’s yours.”

I spun around and was starting to walk away when she warned, “You better hear about the note before you take another step.”

I stopped, but did not turn around. Actually, I knew I should not have stopped. But knowing what you should do and *doing* what you should do are two very different things. I could feel her eyes on my back.

She mentioned, “It was found on that oriental chest in the foyer. The initial entry crew immediately transported it to our lab for analysis.”

Okay, now I had a millisecond to decide—did I really want to hear about the note? This was Washington, the one place where in fact what you don’t know doesn’t hurt you. But having seen all those bodies, I was curious. Boy, was I in a fix.

Then it was too late as she explained, “To paraphrase the words read to me over the phone, this slaughter was a warning. ‘You can’t stop us. There will be others, and the President will be history in the next two days.’”

“History?”

“Their word, not mine.”

That awkward phraseology aside, it occurred to me that my options had just dwindled. The assassins could be foreign terrorists, and that would definitely involve the Agency, so I should stay or I’d be in hot water. Or they could be homegrown idiots and staying would implicate the Agency in a domestic legal matter, and also put my ass in the sling. The only clear fact was that the people who found a way to bypass the security in this house, murdered six people, and beelined out of here were legitimately bad hombres, skilled, bold, and smart. In fact, Mrs. President might think about calling a few term life agencies to see who offered the most affordable rates for a few days of additional coverage on Mr. President.

Margold was thinking along the same lines and said, “This thing might be beyond domestic. You’re as involved as I am.”

Not so. At least, not yet.

She added, ~~“The Director could get here any second. He’s expecting a full and comprehensive briefing. Trust me, he’s not a man you want to disappoint with half-assed results.”~~

“All right. I’m here in an advisory capacity.” I reconsidered and said, “Actually, I’m not here. The instant your boss shows up, I’m out of here.”

She nodded, but did not reply.

In retrospect, I should have heeded the old warning: Never test the depth of water with both feet. But it was already too late.

CHAPTER TWO

WE STEPPED BACK INSIDE FOR ANOTHER VISUAL AND MENTAL SWEEP OF the surroundings. First, however, I took a moment for attitude adjustment. I was annoyed at being back inside this house, annoyed at being blindsided by my boss, and most of all, I was annoyed at Ms. Margold. Had Miss Tightass not kept the motive and victim profiles from me in the first place, we wouldn't have to go through this again. For the record, I've seen death, destruction, and corpses in my Army and legal career, and I'm not queasy. Yet it is something I've never grown used to, and a rerun is in some strange way worse than a first run.

But you have to focus at a murder site, and I noted first the absence of a peephole on the front door. There were lines of small side windows to each side of the door, and I suggested, "Possibly she never saw his face."

"What? Oh...Lacy...You mean Elwood's face?"

"Yeah. Look here. If he stood close enough when he rang the doorbell, even if she peeked out the side window, she could only observe the side of his body."

Margold walked over and peered out the window to confirm the accuracy of this observation.

I obviously did not need to explain why this point was relevant, even important. The driver, Larry Elwood, was at that moment our only identified suspect. But there were no living witnesses and Elwood's face wasn't on the videotape in the basement, which left open the possibility that the gentleman we observed on film stumbling up the walkway was an impostor. The fact that June Lacy couldn't recognize Elwood's face at the door would leave his status ambiguous. Solving crimes is about inclusion and exclusion; Larry Elwood could still go either way, and we were back to roughly five billion UnSubs—FBI-speak for Unknown Subject and normal-speak for haven't got a clue. I mentioned, "Make sure your forensics people take fingerprints from the doorbell buzzer."

"I've already made a mental note of that."

"Incidentally, where's the car? And where's Elwood?"

"Missing. We've confirmed that Elwood left the motor pool at five-thirty, headed this way. An APB's out on him and the car."

"It's a big city."

"No, Drummond, it's a small city. New York and L.A. are big cities."

Ironically enough, I get a little pissed when sarcasm is used on me, and I replied, "Great. Then you'll have no trouble finding them."

“Actually...the car’s equipped with a specially coded satellite navigation system that also works as a locator.”

“Easier still.”

“But it’s apparently been disabled.”

“Isn’t that a surprise.”

“Yeah, actually.” She looked at me and said, “Only a handful of people are aware of the existence of that locator system. A very small handful.”

“Not as small as you thought.”

I took a knee and regarded June Lacy’s body again. Her left hand covered the bullet hole, and the exit wound was hidden beneath her, so it was impossible to confirm whether the same caliber bullet did her as the others.

My eyes shifted to her face. June Lacy wasn’t beautiful or even pretty, really. Her face was too roundish and her features were flat and ordinary, though she was striking, I thought even captivating, in a way that caught you by surprise. It took me a moment before I put a finger on it. She had a noisy innocence, a serenity of spirit, a sort of pleasant simpleness, not of the mind but of the soul, where it counts. Hers was that kind of happy girlish face found peeking out from the third row of a church choir, or at curbside during the Memorial Day parade, hand over her heart, having not the slightest doubt that this is the greatest country on earth, that the world is populated by knights and dragons; she stands with the knights, and is just so damned proud to be part of it. I’m not that type. Perhaps I once was, but no longer. Actually, for a moment I felt guilty and even a little soiled in her presence. More than that, I felt terribly sad and, in some strange way, deeply angry.

Ben had mentioned she was a Minnesotan, and indeed, Special Agent June Lacy emerged from a Nordic gene pool; her hair was silvery blond, her skin fair and unblemished, and her eyes were a sort of Baltic Sea pale blue. She was a slumber party habitu e, never the prom queen though always in the court, the girl everybody entrusted with their most embarrassing secrets, though she wouldn’t be among the elite Secret Service were she not also bright, ambitious, and adventurous.

No doubt, in some small town in northern Minnesota everybody was real tickled that little June with the pretty blond pigtails was now a handpicked bodyguard for the President of the United States. Every year the high school principal probably informed the incoming frosh that if you cracked the books and kept the wrong sorts of noxious substances out of your nose, a desk in the Oval Office might be a stretch, but a seat on Air Force One wasn’t, because one of our fine students did it, and doesn’t that make you all proud?

Clearly, a walk in Lacy’s footsteps would no longer be the galvanizing inspiration it once was.

I glanced up at Agent Margold, who, incidentally, looked like the class-valedictorian-school-president-most-likely-to-succeed type. “She never had time to react.”

“Don’t feel sorry for her, Drummond. Had she been on her toes this would never have happened.”

A priori, I couldn’t argue that point, nor did I try. In my experience women tend to be harsh about other women. Whereas I, a male, was a bit conflicted. It’s no longer PC to regard men as the protectors and females as the protected, implying as it does a relationship of the stronger and the weaker. We’re all interchangeable and androgynous these days—all sensitive, caring creatures, who share cooking duties, child-rearing, and thankfully not childbirth or monthly periods. I even remember to put down the toilet seat at a lady’s house. But I was raised an Army brat and spent my life on Army bases, where the fifties are eternal. Point is, I find it a little difficult to get my arms around all the contemporary mantras on these things, and I was very pissed that somebody put a bullet through June’s throat.

I noted the sparkly engagement rock on her finger. Two more weeks and the knot would've been tied; the bridal gown surely was fitted and bought, the church reserved, the RSVPs collected—the guests wouldn't even have to change their travel plans, just their moods and wardrobes. I was tempted to adjust her skirt for dignity's sake, but Margold and her pals would probably get lathered up and cite me in a report or something.

I squeezed June's shoulder, stood up, and informed Margold, "Let's reconstruct."

"Fine. You start."

"All right. At 6:15, Lacy's probably waiting in the foyer for Elwood to arrive. Maybe she's seated on a stair—the guys downstairs announce through her earpiece that Elwood's headed up the walkway—*ding-dong*, she walks to the door, opens it, some guy's holding a pistol, and before she can speak or react, *bang*—no, not *bang*, but *psssst*—a bullet passes through her throat. Right?"

"Right. Had to be a silencer."

"She flies backward. Two, maybe four guys enter, and...and..."

"And what?"

"Maybe not all the killers were men."

Margold gave me a weird look. "Yeah...possibly. You're thinking they brought along a woman to stay at the door and talk so the Belknaps would hear a feminine voice and not suspect anything amiss."

"It's a possibility we need to consider."

She looked down at Lacy a moment. "Interesting theory. Wouldn't that presuppose they knew a female agent would open the door?"

We both allowed that vagrant thought to hang for later. Margold suggested, "Next one shooter goes into the living room, and one or two more sneak downstairs to the basement. One remains here by the door. Say it's a she...she goes straight to the kitchen and gets into position...she gives the signal and they all open up." She faced me. "Like that, right?"

"Be careful with the exact numbers. Say two to four, and wait till forensics and ballistics confirm the exact count." I added, "Where are the spent shells?"

"You're thinking they used catchers on the guns?"

"If they used silencers, that means automatics, and that means the shells should've ejected. Tell your forensics people to look under every rug and inside every crevice. Of course, I doubt they'll find any."

"Right."

We returned to the dining room, where the two agents still loitered against the wall. Margold looked at them and said, "You two getting paid for sitting on your asses?"

The heavy one said, "Ah, don't bust our balls. We've sealed it off and we're waiting for forensics. Just following the manual and making sure we don't contaminate the site." After a moment he added, "You'd be well-advised to do the same."

Margold shook her head and began walking around the table.

I asked, "Why aren't the ME and forensics here already?"

The skinny guy said, "We were ordered to avoid locals. No quality control or evidence transfer issues." After a moment, he added, "So the teams have to come all the way up from Quantico." He shook his head. "Welcome to Washington. They're caught in traffic. About five minutes out."

Margold was moving around the room, testing out the shooters' positions, I guess to confirm my theory about a second gunman. She looked at me and said, "I'm done. Anything else?"

"Uh..." There was something. But what?

She looked at her watch and asked, again, "Are you done?"

I studied Mr. and Mrs. Belknap. We were overlooking something, I was sure. I said, “Ben mentioned Elwood arrived at 6:15 every morning.”

“Yeah. And he came five minutes late this morning.”

“You should think about that five minutes.”

“On my list already.”

“Also...well...Belknap probably had to wake up at five...maybe five-thirty, so he could shower, shave, dress, and have breakfast.”

“What’s your point?”

“You married?”

“No...why?”

“Ever been married? Cohabited?”

“No, I’ve...” But apparently I had struck a sensitive nerve, because she snapped, “If you have a point, get on with it.”

“Conjugal habits, Agent Margold. The guy’s an early bird; she didn’t have to be. How’d they know these two get up and eat breakfast together?”

I was sure she got my point, but she did not acknowledge it. In fact, she said, “Let’s go back to the basement. Now.”

She stopped halfway down the stairs, turned to me, and whispered, “No more of those observations in front of the others. Obviously, if the killers knew how to skirt the security, and obviously if they knew about the security room in the basement, and...I’m not stupid, Drummond. Inside knowledge, right?” She looked me in the eyes and added, “But don’t confirm that to anybody. Understand?”

I didn’t understand. But I did appreciate that there was more here than met the eye—either a cover-up or not everybody in this house was trusted, or this lady had a few bats in her attic.

Ben had also returned to the security room, where he was replaying the tape of Elwood over and over, like if he watched it enough times the past would change and he’d still have a career. I sort of felt sorry for the guy. The killers had not played fair; they had found the kink in Ben’s armor, and broken it off in Ben’s butt.

The rule of thumb in his business is that guarding moving targets is the tough part. Home truly is a man’s castle, and when you construct a deep moat around it, and you man the ramparts with stouthearted souls, it should be safe and impenetrable.

Should be. Unless the moat becomes your worst enemy. From the moment that black limo pulled into the driveway and entered into the castle proper, so to speak, it was accepted by the watchmen in the basement for what it appeared to be and in fact was not. The system instills confidence, nullifies distrust, and erases the wariness. June Lacy didn’t die because she was careless, June Lacy died because her bosses told her to trust the electronic moat to do her work for her.

Every Washington institution plays by its own rules, and the Secret Service has a less forgiving mentality than most. Ben was headed for an early pension, unless he was a wicked bullshitter, in which case he’d end up handing out tickets at the White House tours office. But it was better than the cold morgue drawer where his team and the hapless Mr. and Mrs. Belknap were headed.

Anyway, Margold and I nosed around and gave the basement security room another once-over. Nothing new jumped out, though I concluded that Margold had probably hit the mark about the progression of death—the guy in the chair got nailed first, the lady at the console got it second, and then the sleeper.

If you had perfect intelligence and time to consider and plan the assault on this room, that’s exactly how you’d do it; says so in the manual, neutralize the most imminent threats first. But that was

exactly the point; the shooters didn't have time—they burst open the door and shot. I looked around for stray bullets that had struck a wall or the furniture. None. One shot, one kill...with the exception of the lady at the console, who took three slugs on her right side. I spent a moment examining her more closely. Her right arm was stretched out, she was in easy reach of the panic button, and it struck me that her killer had coldly used the impact of the bullets to drive her back, to prevent her from reaching it.

Very impressive.

Too impressive. I mentioned to Margold, "It's likely they used fiber-optic filament cameras. Slip under the door, and you know what lies behind the closed door."

She nodded. Then she bent over the corpse on the bed. She was beginning to explain, "This guy must've pulled the night shift, and—" when her cell phone went off. She answered, "Margold...uh-huh...I understand, George...right." After a moment, she said, "No...well, we're almost wrapped up...Uh, yeah, we can be there. Ten minutes."

She punched off and appeared distracted. Finally she looked at Ben. "I've gotta go. Forensics and the ME will be here any minute. Agent Jackson's in charge till they get there." She looked at me. "The Director got diverted en route. We're heading to his location."

"We?" I shook my head. "Your boss, your case, your nightmare."

For the second time she smiled. "Is It? Did I fail to mention we're meeting at the George Bush Center? Isn't that a CIA facility?"

I stared at her, then I turned to Ben and said, "Give us the tape with Elwood arriving." A fresh thought hit me, and I asked Ben, "Did you view the portion with Elwood departing?"

"Uh...no. I...I hadn't thought of that."

"Provide that, too."

Margold looked at me and said, "Good catch."

"Right."

We went back upstairs, and halfway up I grabbed her arm and suggested, "You should think twice about allowing Ben free rein of this house."

"Meaning what?"

"For one, he's a potential suspect. Inside knowledge got out, and Ben certainly knew the layout."

"What's two?"

"There's going to be a witch hunt, and Ben was in charge of this operation. He should never have been permitted to tamper with the evidence before you arrived. But this is now your watch. Cover your ass."

"I...I should've thought of that."

She was right. She should have.

She returned to the dining room to inform Agent Jackson he had the football and to eject Ben from this house.

Ben rejoined us at the front door, handed Margold the tapes, and said to me, "Look...don't draw hasty conclusions. There's no proof there was more than one killer."

"There was more than one, Ben. Get used to it. If it's any consolation, I'll be sure to pass on that the security was nearly adequate."

"Gee...thanks."

"Think nothing of it."

"Yeah. I won't."

On our way to the car, Margold said to me, "This what you do for the Agency...reconstruct crime

scenes?”

“Nope.”

“Then how’d you...how’d you put it together?”

“Oh...well, I used to kill people.”

She shook her head. “Seriously.”

“All right, I’m a criminal lawyer.”

She rolled her eyes and said, “That’s why I hate working with you CIA people. You’re all compulsive liars.”

I smiled.

She said, “Get in the car.”

And the problem with the FBI is they’re all compulsive skeptics. Before I went to law school I was in Special Ops, I did do this for a living, and it does afford a certain familiarity with method and technique.

On a more becomingly modest note, I saw the disturbances in the garden mulch before we ever entered the house. Margold should’ve paid better attention when she was slapping on her latex mittie and telling me what an asshole I was.

She informed the driver, “We’ve got five minutes. Don’t make me late. Move.”

He stomped on the gas, and we peeled out down Ballantrae Farm Drive, mini-mansions whizzing by on the left and right. Halfway down the block, a long convoy of vans and dark Crown Vics passed us going the other way. Margold whipped out her cell phone and spent two minutes giving instructions to her contact in the forensics team, telling the technicians what to collect—foot molds in the garden, spent shells, fingerprints on the doorbell buzzer, whatever. She ended the conversation saying, “Yeah...okay...we’ll both find a time later for you to get our shoe molds.”

She punched off, sat back, and stared out the window, apparently searching her brain for anything she had overlooked. This was a lady with a world of bad news on her shoulders, and she was not carrying it well, in my view. I asked her, “Are you the case officer?”

“Nope. That would be Special Agent Mark Butterman. A good man, one of our best.”

“He one of the guys back at the house?”

“Those were initial response guys. Butterman lives halfway to Baltimore. He’s in that big convoy.”

“Well, why were you sent?”

“Same reason you were sent.”

“Because you’re witty, charming, and brilliant?”

She eyed me for a moment and then said, “You can figure out a crime scene, but you can’t figure this out?”

“Enlighten me.”

“They need two sacrificial assholes to take the fall in the event this thing doesn’t work out and the President dies.”

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