



BARRY EISLER  
A JOHN RAIN THRILLER

# THE LAST ASSASSIN

'Like McNab's Nick Stone and  
Child's Jack Reacher,  
John Rain is a classic character'  
*THE TIMES*

The Last Assassin  
by  
Barry Eisler

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# I

I've never liked doing a job in a new place. You don't know how to get in and out undetected, you don't know what tools you'll need to access the target, you don't know where you'll stick out and where you'll be able to fade into the background or disappear in a crowd.

To compensate, I start by studying the area from afar, move in only when I've learned as much as possible, and always arrive early enough to become familiar with the local terrain before it's time to act. Tactics like these have kept me alive, and even reasonably prosperous, during more than a quarter century of doing the thing I've always been best at.

But this time the preparation was reflex, not necessity. I wasn't on a job, for one thing; I was done with the life. Or almost done. There was one last thing, a big one, but I didn't want to face that just yet. Barcelona was supposed to be an interlude: pleasure, not business, and it was disturbing that some part of my mind seemed not to understand the difference.

Still, in alien circumstances, we tend to cling to habit, and so I found myself defaulting to my usual approach. I should have known better. Barcelona was unfamiliar, but the real territory I was trying to navigate isn't marked on any map.

I flew JAL from Tokyo via Amsterdam and arrived at Barcelona El Prat on a mild winter evening with nothing more than the plain carry-on bag in my hand and the cheap

business suit on my back. On my feet were a pair of plain brown leather loafers, purchased in a mass market Aoyama men's store; on my nose, nonprescription steel-framed eyeglasses, calculated to obscure my features; in my pocket, a guidebook in Japanese. For my first days in the city, I would be an anonymous salaryman, recently divorced, his children grown and out of the house, seeking distraction through travel slightly more intrepid than last year's jaunt to Hawaii or Saipan. When Delilah arrived I would morph into something else.

The staff at Le Meridien hotel on Las Ramblas spoke their delightfully Catalan-accented English slowly, as my own halting, heavily Japanese-accented attempts indicated I would need. I certainly looked the part. My face is courtesy mostly of my Japanese father, and what vestiges my American mother contributed to the mix were diminished by surgery many years ago. The act came easily, too. I've had a lifetime to practice playing roles: no drama school training, true, but if you've lasted as long as I have in a business as literally cutthroat as mine, you learn a thing or two.

I was tired. Jet lag had been a nonissue in my thirties, a nuisance in my forties, and now it was more noticeable than ever. I went straight to my room, ate a room service meal, took a hot bath, and slept fitfully through the night.

I got up at dawn. I'd never been to Barcelona before, and wanted to see the city at first light, not yet on its feet, not yet wearing its makeup. I showered quickly and went out just as the sun was cresting the horizon. I scanned the street as I moved past the lobby window, then checked ambush positions from in front of the hotel. Everything looked fine.

I walked out to Las Ramblas, my breath fogging just

slightly in the morning-chilled sea air, and paused. Ten meters down, three men in sanitation overalls and rubber boots were rolling up a dripping hose; the cobblestones were still slick from their work. I stood silently and didn't let them notice me. They finished with the hose, got in a truck, and drove off. When the sound of the engine had faded, it was followed only by silence, and I smiled, pleased to have the city to myself for a while.

I strolled east into the *Barri Gòtic*, the gothic quarter. I sensed I had arrived during a tenuous interlude between the departure of the night's last revelers and the morning's first arrivals, and I paused, enjoying the feeling that I was privy to some secret transition. I wandered for a long time, listening to my footfalls on the narrow stone streets, enjoying the aroma of fresh bread and ground coffee, watching as the area's residents gradually emerged from behind the centuries-old façades of scarred but stalwart dwellings to start another day.

After a breakfast of croissants and coffee *cortado*, I paid a visit to *Ganiveteria Roca*, a famous cutlery store I'd read about while preparing for the trip. There, among the pewter razors and steel scissors and related items, I selected a Benchmade folder with a three-inch blade. I'd gotten used to carrying a knife in the last year or so, and no longer felt comfortable without something sharp close at hand.

Now properly outfitted, I started my customary systematic exploration of the city. I wouldn't feel at ease here until I had learned how best to blend, or how to escape, should my attempts at blending fail. So I went everywhere, that day and for the five days and nights after, at all times, by all means of transit. I absorbed the layout of the streets and alleys; the location of police stations and security cameras;

the rhythms and rituals of pedestrians and tourists and shopkeepers.

But there were so many distractions: the mingled smell of tapas and shawarma among the winding alleyways of El Raval; the sounds of music and laughter echoing in the public squares of Gràcia; the feel of the sea breeze on my face and in my hair on the peaks of Montjuic and Tibidabo. I liked that the locals took for granted morning mass in six-hundred-year-old cathedrals. I liked the contrasts: gothic and *modernista*; mountains and sea; historical weight and exuberant esprit.

And the distractions weren't limited to the city itself. I was also suddenly aware of parents with infants. They were everywhere: walking their babies in strollers, holding them in their arms, gazing at their small faces with crippling devotion. Tatsu, my sometime nemesis and current friend in the Keisatsucho, the Japanese FBI, had warned me this would be the case, and, as in so many other matters, he had been right.

What Tatsu hadn't prepared me for, what he couldn't, were the thousand other ways his news about Midori had left me ambivalent, confused, almost in shock. I had nearly canceled with Delilah, but then decided not to. I owed her an explanation, for one thing. I still wanted to see her, wanted it a lot, for another.

I never could have predicted the affection I'd developed for Delilah, or that she seemed to have developed for me. Certainly our initial encounters were inauspicious. First there was Macau, where we learned we were working the same target. Then Bangkok and Hong Kong, where she was supposed to be working me. And yet the inherent mistrust born of working for competing intelligence organizations —

Delilah, for the Mossad, and I, freelance at the time for the CIA – had paradoxically provided a stable foundation. Each of us recognized in the other a professional, an operator with an agenda, someone for whom business imperatives would always trump personal desire. All of that became the basis for respect, even mutual understanding, and ultimately provided the context for the indulgence of undeniable personal chemistry. The sex couldn't lead anywhere, we both knew it. So why not enjoy what we had, whatever it was, for as long as it lasted?

But it did last, and it deepened. We spent a month together in Rio, after which Delilah had defied her paymasters when they ordered her to set me up. Defy, hell, she had very nearly betrayed them. She had warned me what was coming, and then worked with me to straighten things out. There must have been something between us, something worthwhile, if we had managed to avoid so many potentially lethal obstacles, and Barcelona was going to be the time and place to figure out what.

On the day Delilah was due to arrive, I checked out of Le Meridien and did some shopping in preparation for my transition from anonymous salaryman to the more cosmopolitan persona I think of as the real me. I bought pants, shirts, and a navy cashmere blazer at Aramis in Eixample; underwear, socks, and a few accessories at Furest on the Plaça de Catalunya; shoes at Casas in La Ribera; and a leather carrying bag to put it all in at Loewe, on the ground floor of the magnificent Casa Lleó Morera building on the Passeig de Gràcia. I paid cash for everything. When I was done, I found a restroom and changed into some of the new clothes, then caught a cab to the Hotel La Florida, where Delilah had made a reservation.

The ride from the city center took about twenty minutes, much of it up the winding road to the top of Mount Tibidabo. I had already reconnoitered the hotel and environs, of course, during my exploration of the city, but the approach was every bit as impressive the second time around. In the late afternoon sunlight, as the cab zigged and zagged its way up the steep mountain road, the city and all its possibilities appeared below me, then disappeared, then came tantalizingly back. And then vanished once again.

When the cab reached the entrance to the hotel, seven stories of taupe-painted plaster and balconied windows overlooking Barcelona and the Mediterranean beyond, a bellhop opened the door and welcomed me. I paid the driver, looked around, and got out. I had no particular reason to think Delilah or her people wanted me dead – if I had, I never would have agreed to meet her here – but still, I stood for a moment as the cab drove away, checking likely ambush positions. There weren't many. Exclusive properties like La Florida aren't welcoming to people who seem to be waiting around without a good reason. The hotels assume the lurker is a paparazzo waiting to shoot a celebrity with a camera, not a killer possessed of rather more lethal means and intent, but the result is the same: inhospitable terrain, which today would work in my favor.

The bellhop stood by, holding my bag with quiet professionalism. The grounds were impressive, and he must have been accustomed to guests pausing to enjoy the moment of their arrival. When I was satisfied, I nodded and followed him inside.

The lobby was bright yet intimate, all limestone and walnut and glass. There was only one small sitting area,

currently unoccupied. It seemed I had no company. My alertness stayed high, but the tension I felt dropped a notch.

A pretty woman in a chic business suit came over with a glass of sparkling water and inquired after my journey. I told her it had been fine.

‘And your name, sir?’ she asked, in lightly Catalan-accented English.

‘Ken,’ I replied, giving her the name I had told Delilah I would be traveling under. ‘John Ken.’

‘Of course, Mr Ken, we’ve been expecting you. Your other party has already checked in.’ She nodded to a young man behind the counter, who came around and handed her a key. ‘We have you in room three-oh-nine – my favorite in the hotel, if I may say so, because of the views. I think you’ll enjoy it.’

‘I’m sure I will.’

‘May I have someone assist with your bag?’

‘That’s all right. I’d like to wander around a little before going to the room. See a bit of the hotel. It’s beautiful.’

‘Thank you, sir. Please let us know if there’s anything else you need.’

I nodded my thanks and moved off. For a little while, I ‘wandered’ around the first floor, checking everything – eclectic gift shop, low-key bar, comfortable lounge, spacious stairwells, abundant elevators – and found nothing out of place.

I took the stairs to the third floor, paused outside 309, and listened for a moment. The room within was quiet. I placed my bag and empty glass on the ground, took off my jacket, crouched, and loudly slipped the key into the lock. Nothing. I held the jacket in front of the door and opened it a crack. Still nothing. If there was a shooter in there, he

was disciplined. I shot my head over and back. I saw only a short hallway and part of a room beyond. I detected no movement.

I stood up, eased the Benchmade from my front pocket, and silently thumbed it open. ‘Hello?’ I called out, stepping inside.

No answer. No sound. I let the door close. It clicked audibly behind me.

‘Hello?’ I called out again.

Nothing.

‘That’s weird . . . must be the wrong room,’ I muttered, loudly enough to be heard. I opened the door and let it close. To anyone hiding inside, it would sound as though I had left.

Still nothing.

I padded down the hallway, toe-heel, pausing after each step to listen. My newly purchased soft-soled Camper shoes were silent on the polished wood floor.

At the end of the hallway, I could see the entire room but for the bathroom. The closet door was open. Probably that was Delilah, knowing I would approach tactically and wanting to make it easier for me, but I wasn’t sure yet.

There was a note on the bed, conspicuous in the middle of the flawless white quilt. I ignored it. If this had been my setup, I would have put the note on the bed and then nailed the target from the balcony or bathroom while he went to read it.

The glass doors to the balcony were closed, the curtains open, and I could see no one was out there. Probably Delilah again, lowering my blood pressure.

All that remained was the bathroom, and I started to relax a little. The worst part about clearing a room, especially

if you have only a knife and the other guy might have a gun, is traversing the ‘fatal funnel,’ where the enemy has the dominant position and a clear field of fire. In this case, narrowing down the ambush points to just the bathroom reduced my vulnerability considerably.

I walked to the side of the open bathroom door. I paused and listened. All quiet. I waved the jacket in front of the door to see if it would draw fire – nothing – then burst inside. The bathroom was empty.

I let out a long breath and walked past the glass-enclosed shower to the window. The views, as promised, were stunning: the city and the sea to one side; the snowcapped peaks of the Pyrenees to the other. I looked out for a few minutes, unwinding.

I went back to the door and looked through the peephole. All clear. I retrieved my bag and the glass, brought them into the room, and picked up the note from the bed. It said: *I'm at the indoor pool. Come join me. – D.*

Hard to argue with that. I checked the room for weapons first, then paused for a moment, just breathing, until I felt calmer. I pocketed the note, threw my jacket over a chair, and headed out. A minute later, I entered an expansive glass-and-stone solarium with vaulted ceilings and a sparkling, stainless-steel-bottomed swimming pool.

Delilah was on her back on one of the red upholstered lounge chairs surrounding the pool. She wore a one-piece cobalt-blue bathing suit that showed off her curves perfectly. Her blond hair was tied back, and oversized sunglasses concealed her features. She looked every inch the movie star.

I glanced around. No one set off my radar. It troubled me for a moment that even now, with all we had been through,

all we had shared, I still felt I had to be careful. I wondered whether I'd ever be able to completely relax with her, or with anyone. Maybe I could hope for something like that with Midori. After all, isn't that why medieval kings married off their sons and daughters, to seal blood alliances and make murder unthinkable? Wasn't it the idea that children trump everything, even the most deep-seated resentments and rivalries, that they trump even hate?

I walked closer and paused, just a few feet behind her. I wanted to see whether she might sense my presence. Delilah's antennae were as sensitive as any I've known, but on the other hand there aren't many people who can move as quietly as I can.

I waited a few seconds. She didn't notice me.

'Hey,' I said softly.

She sat up and turned toward me, then pulled off the sunglasses and broke into a gorgeous smile.

'Hey,' she said.

'I've been standing here awhile. I thought you'd notice.'

Her smile lingered. 'Maybe I was just indulging you. I know you like to feel stealthy.'

She stood up and gave me a long, tight hug. I caught a hint of the perfume she wore, a scent I've encountered nowhere else and that I will always equate with her.

There were people around, but we were suddenly kissing passionately. It was always like this when we'd been apart for a while, and sometimes even when we hadn't been. There was just something about the two of us that wouldn't let us keep our hands off each other. I don't know what it was, but sometimes it was overpowering.

I had to sit down on the lounge chair before the condition she had caused attracted further attention. She laughed,

knowing exactly why I had broken the embrace, and sat down next to me, her hand on my leg.

‘How long have you been here?’ she asked.

‘I just arrived a few minutes ago.’

‘Not the hotel. The city. Barcelona.’

I paused, then admitted, ‘A few days.’

She shook her head. ‘What a waste. I could have gotten here earlier, you know. But I knew you’d want to have a look around alone first.’

‘Guess I’m getting predictable.’

‘I understand. I’m just worried I’ll have nothing new to show you.’

I looked into her blue eyes. ‘I want you to show me everything.’

Her hand moved on my leg, playful, insistent. ‘All right. Shall we start with the room?’

We hurried, but getting back to the room seemed to take a lot longer than my trip to the pool a few minutes earlier. We made it, though, and I had her out of that bathing suit before the door had closed behind us.

I kicked off my shoes and we moved into the room, kissing again, Delilah pulling off my shirt and pants. I paused at the foot of the bed to get out of my boxers. Delilah scrambled up and reached suddenly under one of the pillows. Even though I’d checked there already, I tensed, but then saw it was only a condom. It was a measure of her own abandon that she hadn’t reached more slowly – she knew my habits, and what could set me off – but also of mine, that I hadn’t spotted the move in time to have done anything about it.

She lay back and I moved up on top of her, advancing between her open legs. She kissed me again and was rolling

the condom onto me even as I moved inside her. For a second I thought of Midori and was glad we were being smart this time. We hadn't been, in Phuket.

We made love hard and fast. We didn't talk, talk was beside the point, it was just moans and breathing and finally a pair of sharp groans that were probably heard in the adjacent room.

As we lay side by side after, catching our breath, I realized that, for a few minutes, my nearly constant security awareness had been temporarily eclipsed by blind lust, and then by its afterglow. On the one hand, it was liberating, hell, it was life affirming to realize I could have a moment like that. But at the same time, it was worrisome. I hadn't told Delilah yet what I'd learned about Midori. I didn't know how to tell her, or when. What I did know was that I had never needed my skills as much as I would need them for what I planned to do next.

We spent the rest of the afternoon and evening dozing, making love again, then dozing some more. I remember thinking at some point it was good Barceloneans eat so late, or we would have missed our chance for dinner.

We finally managed to shower and get dressed, and then had a hotel car take us to Torre d'Alta Mar, a restaurant perched seventy-five meters above the sea atop the Torre de Sant Sebastián, one of three towers that serve the city's cable car system. Delilah had made the reservation, and once again she had chosen well. The 360-degree views were jaw-dropping; the food, even more so: partridge and lobster and filet mignon, all flavored with Catalan specialties like Ganxet beans, Guijuelo ham, and Idiazábal cheese. We killed two bottles of cava from a local winery called Rimarts. I'd never heard of the place, but they knew what they were doing.

I didn't bring up anything about Midori. It seemed too early. We'd only just gotten together, and the meal and atmosphere were so perfect, I didn't want to spoil any of it. Also, after all those hours of lovemaking, I was just too confused, not only about what I was going to do, but even about what I wanted.

So we stayed with familiar subjects instead, mostly work and travel. She told me she was still on administrative leave, pending her organization's completion of an inquiry into what had happened in Hong Kong, where Delilah had defied orders and helped me. They'd lost a good man there,

and there were people who thought Delilah was to blame. I knew better, of course, but it wasn't as though she could call on me as a character witness.

'I don't mind,' she said. 'I'm happy to have the time off.'

I nodded. 'I was wondering how you managed to get away for this.'

She raised her glass. 'I'd say it worked out well.'

We touched glasses and drank. I said, 'How do you expect it's going to turn out?'

'I'm not even thinking about it.'

I knew her better than that and smiled sympathetically. Delilah didn't like to take shit from her supposed superiors, or from anyone.

After a moment, she shrugged. 'I'm a little worried. Not so much about whether I'm going to be reinstated or reprimanded or whatever. It's more . . . I just hate the way they use me and then judge me for doing the jobs they send me on. You'd think Al-Jib dead would trump everything else, but no.'

Al-Jib had been a terrorist, part of the A. Q. Khan network, who'd been trying to buy nuclear matériel so he could assemble a bomb. Delilah had killed him in Hong Kong, a target of opportunity, and right now that victory was probably the only thing holding the line against her organizational detractors.

'Well, they've got their priorities,' I said.

'Yeah, their little tsk tsk meetings, that's the priority. I swear, sometimes I feel like I should just tell them to go to hell.'

'I've dealt with that type, too,' I said, reaching over and taking her hand. 'Don't let them get you down.'

She smiled and squeezed my hand. 'I haven't even

thought about it since I saw you. Not until we started talking about it, anyway.’

‘Well, you’ll have to see me more often, then,’ I said, before I could think better of it.

She squeezed again and said, ‘I’d like that.’

I didn’t answer.

We finished after midnight and walked northwest into La Ribera. It was a weeknight, but even so El Born, one of the most ancient streets in the city and the heart of La Ribera, was hopping, with crowds spilling out from the bars lining the street and from the surrounding clubs and restaurants. We managed to get a table at a bar called La Palma. It was a beautiful old place, unpretentious, with wine barrels in the corners and sausages hanging from the ceiling. I ordered us each a shot of a 1958 Highland Park, one of the finest single malts on earth – ridiculous at 150 Euros the measure, but life is so short.

Afterward we strolled more. Delilah hooked an arm through mine and snuggled close in the chill night air. It felt so natural it almost worried me. I wondered what it would feel like to be this way all the time. Then I thought of Midori again.

We drifted south, into the Barri Gòtic, where the maze of stone streets narrowed and the crowds thinned. Soon the echoes of our footfalls, the shadowed walls of dark cathedrals and shuttered apartments, were our only companions.

A few blocks west of Via Laietana, I heard loud voices speaking in English, and as we turned a corner I saw four young men coming in our direction. From the clothes and accents, I guessed working-class British, probably football hooligans; from the volume and aggressive tone, I guessed drunk. My immediate sense was that they had struck out

with the local girls in La Ribera, hadn't found any prostitutes to their liking along Las Ramblas, and were now heading back to La Ribera for another pass. My alertness ticked up a notch. I felt Delilah's hand on my arm stiffen just slightly. She was telling me she had noted the potential problem, too.

The street was narrow, almost an alley, and there wasn't much room to let them go by. I steered us to the left so I would have the inside position.

They saw us and stopped shouting. Not a good sign. Then they slowed. That was worse. And then one of them peeled off and started crowding our side of the street, with the others drifting along with him. That was unwelcome indeed.

I eased out the Benchmade and held it hidden against my open palm with my thumb. I didn't want anyone to know there was a knife in play until I decided to formally introduce them to it.

I had hoped simply to pass them, maybe absorbing a predictable shoulder check en route. But they had fanned out widely enough so that going past wasn't an option. Well, I could go through just as easily. I envisioned dropping the nearest one with *osoto-gari*, a basic but powerful judo throw, which I expected would provide an attitude adjustment sufficient for the remaining three. And if Delilah had fallen in behind me, I would have done just that. But she was close beside me, and therefore in my way. I felt her slowing, and I had to slow, too.

A paranoid notion tried to grip me: Delilah could have set this up. But I knew instantly it wasn't that. The four of them were too young, for one thing. Their vibe was too hot, too aggressive. For professionals, violence is a job. For these guys, it felt like an opportunity.

Besides, Delilah hadn't been leading me as we walked. I would have noted that, as I had noted its absence.

We all stopped and faced one another. *Here we go*, I thought.

'Lovely evening, isn't it, ladies?' said the one who had originally started drifting onto our side of the street. He was looking at me, smirking.

'You must be the leader,' I responded, my voice low and calm.

'What's that?' he said, his brow furrowing.

'You moved first, and your friends followed you. And now you're talking first. I figure that means you're the leader. Am I wrong?' I glanced behind us just to ensure no one was closing in from the other direction – all clear – then back at the other three. 'Is it one of you? Come on, who is it?'

The interview wasn't going the way they had hoped. I wasn't cringing. I wasn't blustering. If the idiots had any sense, they would have realized that now I was interviewing them.

'Oh, it's me, all right,' the first one said, trying to recover some initiative.

I nodded as though impressed. 'That's brave of you to say.'

'Why?'

I smiled at him. The smile was in no way pleasant.

'Because now I know to kill you first,' I said.

He glanced at his friends as though reassuring himself of their continued presence, then back at me. I felt him starting to reconsider.

But one of his friends was too stupid or drunk or both to notice the position they were in. 'He's calling you a wanker, man. You going to take that?'

*Fuck.* ‘I’m not calling anyone a wanker,’ I said, my voice still calm and steady. ‘I’m just saying neither of us wants to spoil the other’s evening. La Ribera’s like an outdoor party right now. Isn’t that where you’re going?’

The last question was calculated: not a command, just a reminder, a mere suggestion that could be taken with no loss of face. And I could tell from the guy’s eyes that he wanted to take it. Good.

He glanced at his friends again. Unfortunately, they didn’t give him what he was hoping for. He looked back at me, and I saw he had decided. Decided wrongly.

He started to move in, his arm coming up, probably for a finger jab to my chest or some other classic and stupid next-step-on-the-road-to-violence. He didn’t know that I don’t believe in steps. I like to get where I’m going by the shortest route possible.

But before I could move in and drop him, Delilah stepped between us. She had been so quiet, and the guy had been so focused on me, that it took him a moment to adjust. He paused and started to say something. But he never had a chance to get it out.

Delilah snapped a rising front kick directly into his balls. He made a half-grunting, half-retching sound and doubled over. Delilah moved close and stomped his instep. He grunted again and tried to shuffle back. As his forward leg straightened, Delilah swiveled and thrust a sidekick into the side of his knee. There was a sickening snap and he spilled to the ground with a shriek. I saw her measuring the distance. Then she stepped in and kicked him full-on soccer style, directly in the face. Blood shot from his nose, and he shrieked again, like a field mouse being torn apart by a falcon.

Delilah stopped and looked at the other three. There was

no particular challenge in her expression, just a question: *Who wants to go next?*

They all looked wide-eyed from her to their twisting, wailing compatriot, then back again. Finally one of them stammered, 'Why, why'd you have to do that?'

If I had been feeling more talkative or even just kindly inclined, I would have explained that it was called a 'finishing move.' The idea is that, when your attackers are just bullies, not real operators, you do something so nasty, so gratuitously damaging, to one of them that the collective mindset of the rest veers from *Let's kick some ass!* to something more like *Thank God it wasn't me!* And while they're thus momentarily paralyzed with schadenfreude, you get to walk away unmolested.

All they needed now was a task to focus their scattered attention. 'You'd better get your friend to a hospital,' I suggested evenly, knowing that would help. I touched Delilah's elbow and we moved off.

We changed cabs twice on the way to the hotel. No sense making it easy for anyone to inquire about who we were or where we might have been going. We just kept our heads down and our mouths shut.

Back at La Florida, I let us into the room and locked the door behind us. The bed had been neatly turned down, the lights lowered, and the serene atmosphere was slightly surreal after what had just happened in the street. Delilah pulled off her shoes and examined them. One of them must have had blood on it, because she took it into the bathroom. I heard water run, then stop. A moment later she returned and put the shoes down together by the window. Then she sat on the bed and looked at me, her cheeks still hot and flushed.

‘Sorry about that,’ she said.

I shrugged. ‘Makes me glad that time in Phuket was at least half-consensual. I guess I’d be limping right now if it hadn’t been.’

We both laughed at that, harder than the comment really warranted, and I realized we were still giddy. The aftermath of violence is usually like that. I wondered if she recognized the signs, as I did.

When our laughter subsided, I said, ‘I wouldn’t have stopped to engage them, though. I would have just gone right through them, before they had a chance to get themselves worked up.’

She nodded. ‘I realized afterward that’s what you were thinking. But I don’t have your upper-body strength. I have to play it differently. Plus, you have to admit, I can bring a certain element of surprise to the equation that you can’t.’

‘That’s true. I guess we’ll have to get used to each other.’ I wasn’t sure about the way that sounded, so I added, ‘To the way we do things.’ No, that wasn’t right either. ‘So we can . . . handle situations like that better.’

Her eyes softened and she smiled just slightly, and I felt she was seeing right through me. ‘You think we should get used to each other?’ she asked, ignoring my stupid qualifications.

I looked at her. I didn’t know what to say.

‘I don’t think it’s a bad idea,’ she said, still smiling gently. ‘I’ve been thinking about it myself.’

‘You have?’

‘Sure. Haven’t you?’

I sat down on the bed next to her. My heart started kicking harder.

‘Yeah, I’ve been thinking about it.’

She put her hand on my thigh and squeezed. ‘Good.’

I had to tell her. And if I didn’t tell her now, later it would seem like deceit.

‘But just recently, right after the last time we talked, I got some . . . news.’

The pressure from her hand lessened. ‘Yes?’

‘Remember when we were talking at the Peninsula in Hong Kong?’ I asked. My words were coming out fast, but I couldn’t slow them down. ‘The night you told me about Dov. I told you there was a woman, a civilian I’d screwed things up with.’

‘I remember.’

‘Well, it looks like, the last time I was with her, which was before I met you, we didn’t . . . we weren’t that careful. So it seems . . .’

‘Oh, *merde* . . .’

‘So it seems there’s a child. A boy.’

There was a long pause. I sat there, my heart still kicking, wondering which way this was going to go.

Delilah said, ‘She contacted you?’

I shook my head. ‘I have a friend in Japanese intelligence. He got hold of some surveillance photos of the woman and the child, taken by my enemies. These people don’t know how to find me, so they’re hoping I’ll reappear in the woman’s life. They’re watching her for that.’

‘Is she in danger?’

‘No. I don’t think so.’

‘What’s her name?’

I paused, but I didn’t want it to seem as if I was holding anything back. ‘Midori.’

‘Pretty name.’

‘Yeah.’

‘These people ... they’re hoping you’ll hear about the child? And that hearing will make you go to Midori?’

‘It looks like that, yes.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I think you do. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have brought it up.’

I rubbed my temples and thought. ‘I’m not even sure the child is mine. But I have to know. You can understand that, can’t you?’

There was another long pause. Her hand was still on my thigh, but it felt like an afterthought now.

After a moment, she said, ‘I can. But from what you’ve said, right now, Midori and the boy aren’t in any danger. If you go to them, you might put them in danger, and yourself, too.’ She paused, then added, ‘But you know that.’

‘Yeah.’

She took her hand off my leg. ‘Well, it’s not as though I was expecting us to figure out our crazy situation in just a few days together. It was going to take time no matter what. So you should do what you have to.’

I looked at her. ‘I’m sorry.’

She shook her head. ‘It’s not your fault.’ Then she laughed. ‘Things are never easy for us, are they?’

‘Should I not have told you? We don’t have much time together, and I didn’t want to ruin it.’

‘You didn’t ruin anything. I’m glad you told me. It was respectful.’

‘What do we do now?’

‘We enjoy the time we have together. Like always.’

But I didn’t want it to be like always. I wanted it to be

more than that, and so, I was beginning to understand, did she.

I wanted to tell her all that. But I didn't. I just said, 'Thank you.'

She shook her head and smiled. 'I'm going to take a bath. You want to join me?'

I looked at her, still wanting to say more, still not knowing how.

'A bath would be good,' I said.

Later, Delilah lay next to Rain in the dark. Pale light from a half-moon shone through one of the windows, and she watched him sleep in that almost spookily silent way of his. Most people would be wired all night after a run-in like the one they'd had earlier – she was – but Rain had dropped off almost immediately after they got in bed.

He could be so gentle with her when it was just the two of them that it was hard to remember what he was capable of. But she'd seen his other side before, first on Macau, then in Hong Kong, and she'd felt it surface again tonight in the Barri Gòtic. She wouldn't have told him, but she'd interceded with those drunken Brits in part because she was afraid of what Rain might do if she didn't. She'd noticed him palm something from his front pocket during the confrontation, and assumed it was a knife. She'd hurt that guy badly tonight, it was true. But she was pretty sure Rain would have killed him.

Before going to bed, they'd made love again in the bath. She was glad of that, and took it as a good sign. They had a new situation to deal with, true, as it seemed they always did, but it didn't affect their fundamental chemistry. She hoped it wasn't the situations that were fueling the chemistry. She'd

had affairs like that, where it was the illicitness, or the danger, or some similar thrill that kept the thing going. She didn't want that with Rain. She wanted something more stable. Something . . .

She smiled. The word that had come to her, and that she didn't want to say, was *lasting*.

She'd been aware of these feelings before meeting him here, but she hadn't fully acknowledged them. She'd been afraid to. But now that she was faced with the prospect of losing him, of another woman who'd thrown a trump card down on the table, she couldn't hide from her hopes, either.

She realized she was thinking in Hebrew, and that was strange. French was her default setting for matters of the heart. The one exception was Dov, and she realized with a pang that somewhere along the line Rain must have come to occupy a similar place in her consciousness, the place where she kept her first language, her first love, perhaps her first self.

She watched him. It was good with this man lying next to her, it really was. It wasn't what she had with Dov, but how could it be? She had known Dov before she was formed, when she was guileless, even defenseless. When she was just a girl, in fact. That girl was long gone, so how could she expect a love like hers?

But there were elements of what she had with Rain that she hadn't had with Dov, or with anyone. She and Rain were of the same world. Each understood the other's habits and didn't judge the other's past. They recognized and accepted the weight they each carried from the things they'd done. Both knew that weight irrevocably separated them from civilian society, and at the same time brought them together like some secret sign.

On top of all of which, she couldn't deny, was some astonishing personal chemistry, and the sex that went along with it.

But she didn't think it was love, exactly. It was more like . . . the possibility of love. She wondered for a moment what the difference was, or whether she would ever even know the difference, but she didn't want to think about that now.

She doubted he was seeing things clearly, and that concerned her. His tradecraft was superb, but as far as she knew he'd never before had to use it when he was this emotionally involved. He could screw up. He could get killed. And for what?

He was taking a risk in going to see Midori and the child. He'd acknowledged as much. And a man like Rain would never take a risk like that unless there was something serious he was hoping to gain from it.

She considered for a moment. What do men do when they're facing a hard decision? They defer it by trying to collect more data. Maybe that's all he was up to. But it hurt to know there was even a decision to make.

She tried always to be realistic, to keep her hopes in check. She knew she had no future in her organization. They used her for the things she was good at, but would never trust her with real power. And she'd long ago accepted that, after the things she'd done, she could never have a normal life. She could never have a family. She could never let someone get that close.

Except . . . Rain had been getting that close. Which was why what he'd told her tonight hurt. Worse than hurt. It ached in a place she couldn't describe, a place she hadn't even known was part of her.

Their reservation was for a week, but she didn't know

now how long he was going to stay. She realized this could be their last time together. Even their last night.

Maybe the child wasn't his. That was possible; he'd said so. Or the woman would otherwise reject him. Or something else would happen to make this turn out the way she wanted it to.

She watched him sleep, and was surprised at how possessive she suddenly felt. And threatened. And angry.

She wasn't helpless, of course. There were things she could do to create the right outcome.

She'd gotten a little more information from Rain in the bath. Not much – just that he was going to New York. But combined with the name he'd mentioned, and a few other details she remembered from Hong Kong, it ought to be enough. She'd be looking for a Japanese female, first name Midori, who emigrated to the U.S. from Japan in the last three years, was currently residing in New York, and who gave birth to a boy, probably in New York, in the last eighteen months. Her organization had found people before with a lot less to go on than that.

She lay there for a long time, struggling with warring impulses: hope and fear, sympathy and anger, temptation and guilt. Eventually, just before moonlight gave way to sun, she slept.

Delilah and I spent the rest of the week in Barcelona. My ‘situation,’ as I thought of it, wasn’t on my mind as much as I would have expected, and its absence seemed linked to Delilah’s presence, because I found myself thinking of it mostly when she was off doing something else and I was left alone. At those times I would be gripped by a vertiginous combination of excitement and dread, and I was always glad when we were together again.

Of course the news had been a surprise to her, but beyond that I couldn’t tell. I didn’t know what I was expecting, exactly – that she would be angry with me? Argumentative? Sullen? But she wasn’t. We would get up early and stay out late and make love before napping every afternoon and we didn’t discuss it again.

The only clue I had to how she might really be feeling was that she was less moody than she had been in Rio. Rio had been the first extended time we’d spent together, and it had taken me a while to get used to her periodic pouts and petulance there. But in the end I’d come to appreciate that side of her because it felt real. It told me she was comfortable with me, she wasn’t acting. And now I wondered if the more consistent good cheer on display in Barcelona was deliberate, a form of overcompensation intended to obscure whatever was really going on inside her.

The morning I left, she came with me to the airport. I shouldered my bag outside security and tried to think of

something to say. She looked at me, but I couldn't read her expression.

'I hope you're going to be careful,' she said, breaking the silence.

That wasn't really like her. I shrugged. 'That's not a hard promise for me to make.'

'I'm more concerned with whether you'll be able to keep it.'

'I'll keep it.'

She nodded. 'You going to call me?'

That was even less like her. 'Of course,' I said, but the truth was, my mind was already half elsewhere.

I kissed her good-bye and got into the security line. When I turned back a minute later, she was gone.

Once I was past immigration, I used a prepaid card to call my partner, Dox, from a pay phone. The burly ex-Marine sniper had provided me with his new, sterile cell-phone number via our secure electronic bulletin board. He was stateside at the moment, visiting his parents, and to contact Midori securely I would need his help.

The call snaked its way under the Atlantic and rang on his mobile somewhere on the other side. Then the irrepressible baritone rang out: 'Dox here.'

I couldn't help smiling. When he wasn't in stealth mode, Dox was the loudest sniper I'd ever known. One of the loudest people, even. But he'd also proven himself a trustworthy friend. And, apart from certain stylistic differences that sometimes drove me to distraction, a damn capable one.

'It's me,' I told him.

'Who's "me"? I swear, if this is another one of those "switch to our cellular service and we'll send you a free set of steak knives ..."'

‘Dox, keep it together. It’s me, John.’

He laughed. ‘Don’t worry, partner, no one else even knows this number, so I knew it was you. Just wanted to see if I could get you to talk a little on an open line. I see you’re loosening up some, and that’s all to the good.’

‘Yeah, well, I guess I owe that to you.’

He laughed again. ‘You don’t have to thank me, I know how you feel. What’s on your mind? Didn’t expect to hear from you so soon.’

‘I’ve got a . . . situation I could use your help with. If you’re interested.’

‘This one business, or personal?’

‘This one is personal. But it pays.’

‘Son, if you have a personal situation you need help with, I’m not going to take your money for it. We’re partners. I’ll just help you, like I know you’d help me.’

I was so used to thinking in terms of me against the world that I was momentarily speechless at how much I could depend on this man.

‘Thank you,’ I managed to say.

‘It’s nothing, man. Tell me what you need.’

‘How soon can you be in New York?’

‘Shit, I can be there tomorrow if you need me.’

‘No, take the weekend with your folks. I’ve got a few things to do first anyway. How about if we plan to meet on Monday?’

‘Monday it is.’

‘And maybe you won’t take money for this, but I’m not letting you go out of pocket. You tell me what you spend on travel, okay?’

‘Sure, I’ll just take my customary suite at the Peninsula and you can settle it directly with them.’

‘That’s fine. Although somewhere downtown might be more convenient.’

‘Shit, man, I’m joking. Not about the Peninsula – that’s an outstanding institution. About letting you pay. You shipped me your share of the proceeds from the Hong Kong operation, remember? That ought to cover my current expenses, and then some.’

In Hong Kong, Dox had walked away from a five-million-dollar payday to save my life. Afterward I’d given him the fee I’d collected for the op as a small way of saying thank you. He hadn’t wanted to take it, but had finally agreed.

‘All right, I’m not going to argue with you,’ I said.

‘Good. You can buy the beer, though. Or that fancy whiskey you like.’

I smiled. ‘I’ll call you Monday.’

## 4

I wasn't pressed for time, so I flew indirectly, which is always safer. I cleared customs at Dulles, outside Washington. The Watanabe identity I had created to get me to Brazil three years earlier was still functional, and it took me through customs without a hitch. From there, it was just a short flight to New York.

Despite my oblique approach, when I arrived at JFK, I scanned the crowd outside the arrivals area, then followed a circuitous route through the airport that would draw out any surveillance and render it visible. Arrival areas are natural choke points, typically with lots of waiting people who unintentionally offer good concealment for an ambusher, and I always go to a higher level of alertness, and engage in appropriate countermeasures, at this point when I'm traveling.

When I was confident I was alone, I went outside. I emerged to a cold and rainy New York afternoon. The sky was lead gray, and it looked like the rain might turn to wet snow any minute.

I hadn't been here in several years. My childhood was divided between Tokyo and upstate New York, and Manhattan was the first big American metropolitan center I ever saw or spent significant time in. Since then, I've been back on business any number of times, but never business like this.

The cab line wasn't long. When it was my turn, I got in

and told the driver to take me to the Ritz Carlton Battery Park. I'd made a reservation from Barcelona, but hadn't wanted to mention that over the phone when I was talking to Dox. Maybe I was loosening up a little, as he'd suggested. But some habits die hard.

I watched through the fogging windows as we drove. The cab's wipers beat relentlessly, thump-thump, thump-thump, and I heard thunder in the distance. We crossed into Manhattan, and what pedestrians there were all had their heads down in the hoods of raincoats and under the canopies of umbrellas, their shoulders hunched as though by the weight of some ominous circumstance.

I thought I was going to be excited when I arrived here, but I wasn't. Instead I felt scared.

When you live your life in danger, you're afraid a lot of the time. But you develop a system for dealing with it. You favor certain tools, you refine your tactics, and with success you come to trust both. You learn to focus more on the approach than on the destination, and that keeps the fear at bay. Gearing up calms you down.

So as we pulled up to the hotel, I tried to focus on how I would get to Midori, the kind of thing I'm comfortable with, and not on what I would do afterward, about which I had no idea.

I checked in and headed to my room on the twelfth floor. I liked what I saw: spacious layout, high ceilings, and a wall-to-wall window overlooking the Statue of Liberty and New York Harbor. Somehow the location felt right: Manhattan, yes, but at a safe distance, literally the water's edge, not the tangled inland terrain where I might easily find myself confused or lost or worse. I unpacked, showered, and called housekeeping to have my laundry picked up.

Then I grabbed a hotel umbrella and headed out to do a few evening errands.

I walked north on West Street, the rain beating steadily against the umbrella. A few financial district commuters hurried past me, but the area was otherwise dark and deserted. At Vesey, I walked up a gray riser of stairs and cut east along an elevated walkway. Water dripped from the corrugated roof into puddles on the concrete. On the left, through chain mesh fencing, clusters of construction equipment lay dormant in dust and darkness. I moved to the right and paused for a moment before the metal wall like a visitor in front of a hospital curtain, then looked down through a gap. Below me, frozen in the glow of sodium arc lamps as unflinching as those of any coroner's examination room, was the enormous hole where the towers had burned. At first glance, it was just a large construction site, much like any other. And yet the air was undeniably heavy with the enormity of what had produced this amputated place and the contorted walkways around and above it. The debris had been cleared, the equipment positioned, the lights turned on . . . and then, it seemed, some odd rigor had taken hold. The dead had been carted away but the land had yet to be resettled, and so the area felt sad and pernicious, a purgatory, an inbetween. I looked around and noticed other people who had similarly paused to observe the strange urban absence, and realized the mood of the site was infectious. I moved on.

I kept walking until I reached Tribeca, where the lights and laughter from restaurants and clubs pulled me from the pall that had gripped me farther south. I started to think operationally. The first item I needed was a mobile phone. Ordinarily I eschew mobiles. I've never liked the idea of

carrying something that's quietly tracking and in fact broadcasting my location – especially after revelations about the NSA's post-9/11 eavesdropping program – and I prefer to rely on electronic bulletin boards and, when necessary, random pay phones. But now I needed something I could use to communicate quickly with Dox. Well, a prepaid mobile ought to be secure enough for the short time I'd be using it.

I would have preferred to purchase a unit without identifying myself, but governments all over the world, including Uncle Sam, are cracking down on the anonymous purchase of prepaid cell phones because terrorists seem to like them. Still, using the Watanabe ID, I was able to pick up a pair of slim Nokias with five hundred prepaid minutes apiece at a Cingular store in Chinatown, along with two sets of wireless earpieces.

Next on my shopping list was a folding knife. I'd left the Benchmade behind in Barcelona because to get it on the plane I would have had to check a bag, which I prefer not to do. Finding a replacement in New York, however, was tricky. The local laws governing concealed knives are so stringent that I couldn't find a store that sold anything other than the small Swiss Army variety. I had just about decided to rig up a kitchen knife in a shoulder harness when I came across the right kind of street vendor, a bald black man of indeterminate age with a megawatt smile and secrets in his eyes, who sold me a Strider folder with a four-inch recurve blade.

Next I stopped in an army/navy store and found a gray windbreaker that would be so anonymous in the city as to make me invisible. I also grabbed a plain black umbrella and dumped the blue logo-sporting Ritz Carlton model in a

cluttered corner of the store. A navy baseball cap and a navy shoulder pack completed the ensemble, and, thus properly provisioned, I continued north. I adopted a steady gait, not too fast, not too slow, someone with business in whatever neighborhood I was moving through, a reason for being there, but nothing important enough to hurry over.

Tatsu had gotten me Midori's address, an apartment on Christopher Street in the West Village. His position, high up in the Keisatsucho, had its advantages when it came to acquiring information, even if the quid pro quo was an occasional off-the-books 'favor.' Tatsu's ends were noble, but he certainly believed they justified a wide range of means.

The last time I had seen Midori was in Tokyo, more than two years earlier. She had tracked me down to confront me over what had happened to her father, and I admitted what I had done. And somehow, in the midst of it all, her grief and rage and confusion, we had still fallen into bed one last time. I've thought about that night a lot since then. I've replayed it, dissected it, mined it for meaning. But it always ends the same way: Midori, leaning in close from above me, shuddering as she came and whispering *I hate you* through her tears.

Well, we were going to find out how profound that sentiment really was. And how permanent.

I headed up Sixth Avenue all the way to Christopher, where I made a left. Of course I had already familiarized myself with these routes using various Internet maps, but there's never a substitute for direct experience with the local terrain. There it was, on the other side of the street, a seventeen-story building, prewar, from the look of it, with a doorman in a long coat standing under a green awning out front. In this light and these clothes, and with the umbrella

held low against the weather, I wasn't worried about being spotted, and I slowed. I looked at the building and imagined where I might set up if I were the one waiting here for myself. There weren't a lot of great spots. There was no parking on this section of the street, so vehicle surveillance was out. And the restaurants and gay bars Christopher Street is known for were too far from the apartment to be useful.

There was the doorman, of course. It wasn't impossible that someone had gotten to him, bribed him to keep an eye out for the Asian man in some file photo. I filed him for later consideration.

I kept walking. The bars at the end of the street had some people in front of them, mostly smokers, but no one who was in a position to watch Midori's building or who otherwise felt wrong to me. I noted that several of the places offered live music, and wondered if Midori had chosen the neighborhood in part because of its proximity to her nightly gigs. Probably she had. I thought about taking a look inside, just to see if anyone caused a radar ping, but as always there was a cost-benefit equation at work and this time it argued against being too thorough. Anyone who was here to watch Midori would have to do so from close by her apartment, not from within one of the neighborhood watering holes. And if there were anyone relevant in one of these places, he could as easily spot me as I could spot him. Indoors, I wouldn't have the windbreaker and umbrella to hide behind.

I zigzagged my way south. It was hard to say what it meant that I hadn't spotted anyone tonight. It could be they were focusing more on her public performances, or that she was out at the moment and they knew it. I'd have to know more before I could safely close in.

I stopped at a SoHo bistro for a quick dinner and moved on. According to her website, Midori had a four-night appearance coming up at a jazz club called Zinc Bar on the corner of Houston and La Guardia. The club took me a minute to find, even though I knew the address. It was hidden below street level at the bottom of a steep set of stairs, and the gold letters announcing its existence were only visible when you were directly in front of the place.

I walked down, went through the red curtains, paid the five-dollar cover, and moved inside.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dark, but when they had I was pleased to see that the place was exactly what I was hoping for. The room was a long rectangle with a bar to one side and tables along the other. The stage was set up at the far end. If someone were here watching Midori, Dox would have no trouble spotting him.

I hadn't planned to stay, but I liked the guy who was playing, a guitarist and vocalist named Ansel Matthews, so I ordered an eighteen-year-old Macallan, then sat listening and musing in the semidarkness. I pictured Midori playing in this very room just a few nights hence, and my heart kicked faster.

I spent the next three days walking ceaselessly through lower Manhattan, getting comfortable with the rhythms of its neighborhoods, reacquainting myself with the layout of the streets. The city felt remarkably safe these days. A few times, very late at night, I passed some rough-looking individuals, but my vibe was different without Delilah by my side, and the natives here had no trouble reading it and steering clear as a result.

On one of these excursions, on a garbage-strewn, graffiti-covered street on the Lower East Side at close to two in the

morning, I passed an unmarked door just as a well-dressed couple was leaving it. I realized there was a bar or club inside, and, on uncharacteristic impulse, I pressed the buzzer on the building's façade. A moment later there was the sound of a lock releasing, and I pulled the door open. It was pitch-dark beyond, and it took me a moment to realize I was looking at a curtain. I moved past it and encountered another. I parted this one as well, and found myself standing at the far end of a quietly spectacular bar.

It was a single room, with a brick wall on one side and plaster and some sort of hammered metal on the other. There were about eight booths, lit mostly by candlelight, with a small wood and metal bar in between them. Soft music I couldn't identify but immediately liked played in the background, mingling with quiet laughter and conversation. The bartender, a pretty woman in her mid-twenties, asked if I had a reservation. I admitted I didn't, but she told me it was fine, I could have a seat at the bar anyway.

The place, I learned, was called Milk & Honey. The bartender, who introduced herself as Christi, asked me what I did, and I found I didn't want to lie to her. I told her I'd rather hear about the bar, and she and a colleague, Chad, explained that Milk & Honey existed to provide the best cocktails in Manhattan and the right atmosphere in which to enjoy them. They squeezed their own juice and prepared their own tinctures and even carved their own ice – it was that kind of place. I enjoyed myself so much that I wound up staying for three of their stunning mixes – including a caipirinha made with Pot Still rum and infused with muddled concord grapes. All were prepared with a level of care and enthusiasm I had never seen outside Japan.

I imagined taking Midori here, with no reason or

circumstance other than our desire to be together. We'd never had that before, I realized. Initially, I'd used her for information about her father. Then I'd gone on the run with her, protecting her from the people who'd hired me to kill him. Finally, when she was safe, she'd hunted me down to confront me over her suspicions about who I was and what I had done. All of it had been so intense, we'd never had a chance to just relax, to see what it was between us.

*What it was between us?* I thought. *You killed her father.*

Jesus. What the hell was I thinking? I was never going to be able to take her here, here or anywhere else. This was crazy, it was never going to work.

I wanted to get out, get the next plane to anywhere and forget that Midori lived here, forget everything. What I had with Delilah was good. I was an idiot for doing anything to risk it.

But I had to see the child. I had to know.

The problem was, it wasn't just Delilah I was risking. It was much more than that, and I knew it.

But I couldn't think of the stakes now. I couldn't fully face them.