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A JOHN RAIN THRILLER

REQUIEM FOR AN ASSASSIN



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Requiem for an Assassin
by
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JIM HILGER and his team sat hunched over a group of surveillance photos in a budget hotel room in Kuta, on Bali's famed west coast. The late-afternoon monsoon rains had given way to a clear night sky, and the adjacent beach was still noisy with revelers—Australians, drinking away the last night of a holiday before returning to the grind back home; American frat kids, a bit more adventurous than their peers in Fort Lauderdale, lured to Kuta by true stories of cheap accommodations and oceanside discos and like-minded young people searching for sin; dark-skinned Balinese beauties in bikini tops and sarongs, looking for rich white boyfriends, or, failing that, a night or even an hour in exchange for a proper tip in convertible currency. In fact, the hotel was a popular stop for tourists who had found a local “date” nearby and were in a hurry to consummate the transaction, and the high turnover, cash basis, and reluctance of patrons to meet each other's eyes made places like this one good expedient safehouses, not just here in Indonesia, but in many other countries where Hilger operated. Sex could be a good cover for secrecy; salaciousness, for murder.

For security, the five of them had arrived one by one earlier that evening at staggered times, and, so as not to stand out, each had come accompanied by an appropriately nubile Balinese companion. Indeed, Hilger knew that two of the men had arrived early enough to fully indulge the cover their temporary girlfriends provided, but Hilger was untroubled by their behavior. He had commanded men in war and understood their needs, and besides, he would rather they get a taste of the local fauna early so they would be less inclined to chase after it late at night. The man they were hunting was dangerous, and Hilger wanted everyone sharp.

Hilger knew the man as Dox, said to be short for “unorthodox,” a nom de guerre the man had acquired during his unsung service in Reagan-era Afghanistan. Once upon a time, Dox had been a Marine sniper, one of the best, but these days worked freelance. Hilger had used him three times. On the first two occasions, Dox had performed superbly. The third had been a disaster, and was what the present operation was all about.

“Look at this,” the man sitting across from Hilger said, pointing at a photo taken through a 500mm lens. “We’ve seen him coming and going from his villa. It’s isolated. I think we could take him there.”

Hilger nodded. The man’s suggestion was sensible. His name was Demeere—a big, blond Belgian bastard and veteran of his country’s *Détachement d’Agents de Sécurité*. The DAS guys provided security at Belgian embassies. They were trained by Belgian special forces, comfortable in urban environments, and typically multilingual. Demeere had been one of their standouts. As adept in a particularly rigorous form of tai chi as he was with a knife, he had, over the years, assisted Hilger with four successful “renditions” of terror suspects, and Hilger knew his counsel was worth considering.

“I like the villa,” the man behind Demeere said. “Go with what you know, that’s what I say.”

It took some effort on Hilger’s part not to grimace. Demeere, whose back was to the speaker, evinced slightly less facial control.

Hilger looked up and observed the man for a moment. He was standing apart from the rest of them, leaning against the wall by the window while the others sat across from each other on the room’s twin beds. No one responded to his comment. Even pointing out its vapidness would have been more engagement than any of them seemed willing to grant him.

The man liked to refer to himself as Drano, and Hilger hadn’t liked that from the start. Nicknames bestowed by comrades were an honor. If you tried to invent one for yourself, it was a joke, a sign of narcissism and an underlying lack of confidence. Hilger had known better at the time, but he’d lost so many men in the last two years that he’d ignored the warning from his gut as he went about restaffing. Stupid. Never time to do it right, always time to do it over.

The guy had come highly recommended, true. Former Navy SEAL, combat duty in Afghanistan. But that kind of background was merely necessary, and not always sufficient, for what Hilger demanded of his men. Anyway, even among SEALs there was an occasional loser. Apparently, it had been Hilger’s bad luck to come across one of them.

The man to Demeere’s left rotated his bald head, breaking the silence by cracking the joints in his neck. “Better to wait,” he said, looking first at Demeere, then at Hilger, and ignoring Drano completely. “His villa would be convenient, sure, but it’s no coincidence he built the place in the middle of all those rice paddies. You know how long it’ll take us to slog all the way through to his house? If he’s got sensors deployed and sees us coming, he’ll turn

us into fertilizer one at a time. And I don't want to go in on that zigzagging little access road, either. He knows that's the only approach, he's got to have it rigged. And trying to set up there while he's gone would be worse. I guarantee you he's got layered systems that would warn him. Better to take him on unfamiliar ground. The downside is more potential witnesses and the other risks you get rendering someone in public, but overall our odds are better."

The man's name was Frank Garza, but he was known in Hilger's organization as Pancho, the name given him by his Mexican mother. While Demeere had a deceptively placid exterior, Pancho tended to radiate a not-to-be-fucked-with aura that he had a hard time concealing. A former All-Marine boxing champion, he also had a fourth degree black belt in Kenpo. One night he and Demeere had gotten into a sparring match that had started out playful and then become serious. To Hilger, it had been like watching an irresistible force and an immovable object. If Hilger hadn't stopped it, the two of them might have crippled each other and destroyed a hotel room in the process.

"The question is, how much time do we have," the fifth man said, leafing through the photographs. "That town he lives in, Ubud, isn't exactly huge, so sooner or later he'll wind up where we want him. But if we need to move fast, we have to go where we know he'll be. Right now that means the villa."

The man's name was Guthrie. His boyish good looks had made for excellent cover during his service as a Federal Air Marshal, and the training he'd received then, along with ferocious natural ability, made him their best combat shooter. Unlike Demeere and Pancho, he was no martial artist, but nor did he believe in fighting, preferring to settle disputes amicably with the Wilson Combat .45 he carried in a belly band under an untucked shirt.

Hilger nodded, considering. There was a lot he hadn't told them yet. They all hailed from careers in need-to-know environments, and understood his reticence. But maybe he had given them too little. At this point, keeping them in the dark made them unable to properly weigh the costs and benefits, to plan effectively. Yes, he decided. They needed to understand . . . if not the full picture, then at least a larger part of it.

"You're all being too cautious," Drano said, still leaning against the wall and looking down on them as though bored, or in judgment.

Hilger looked up, liking neither the man's tone nor his choice of "you're" instead of "we're." The other men glanced at one another. Their expressions were too subtle to be called disgusted, but Hilger knew disgust was what they felt. This was hardly the first time Drano had insisted on offering his unsolicited and useless "expertise," and they were sick of his weak bullshit. The man had been a mistake. And if Hilger didn't deal with it soon, his men would rightly judge him for it.

"Really," Hilger said, mildly.

"Really," Drano said, nodding his head aggressively. "One man, night-vision goggles, just before dawn, a kerosene bomb on that thatched roof of his. We take him when he runs outside."

"You going to take the neighbors, too?" Hilger asked, his tone even milder now, bordering on gentle. "They'll come out when they see fire. And do you know which way Dox'll run? Tell us, so we can be in position. Oh, and police and firefighters, we can expect a few of them to show up, so we'll need a plan for that, too. And the attention we'll get during and after from a nocturnal blazing Ubud villa, we'd all appreciate any pointers you could offer us there. This is all assuming you don't trip a sensor and get your head

blown off on the approach to the house, of course. But you could probably bat the bullet out of the air with your own dick if it came to that, right?"

The man shrugged, too stupid, or proud, to admit his mistake. "Sometimes you have to take a chance if you want to get something done," he said.

The other men weren't even looking at Drano now. In fact, they'd been making their distrust apparent through body language for a while now, and Drano had picked up on it. It was why he was standing apart—he knew he wasn't welcome. And the stupid criticism was really just a misguided bid for attention, to be accepted among company to which he aspired to belong.

Hilger suddenly recognized the reason he'd been withholding information from the men, information they needed to plan the operation. It was because he knew this bozo was untrustworthy. And rather than fix the problem, he'd been living with it, hoping it would magically take care of itself. Now that he realized it, he was quietly furious at his own weakness. But all right, better late than never. The man had to go.

He turned to Demeere. "How are we staffed for this?"

"Three is the bare minimum," Demeere said without hesitating, and Hilger knew from the readiness of the answer that the big Belgian already understood. "Four is comfortable. Five is a hundred percent."

Hilger nodded. "All right. Then we're in good shape." He glanced behind Drano. "Close those drapes, will you?" he said. "They're open at the edges, it's sloppy."

Drano turned and adjusted the drapes. Even without all the other faults that had combined to disqualify him, the cluelessness he displayed right then would have been enough.

In the two seconds during which Drano's back was turned, Hilger reached with his right hand for the SIG P232 he kept as backup in an ankle holster; grabbed a pillow with his left; and pulled the pillow around the muzzle of the gun, holding the ends tight at his right wrist so that the gun was completely enclosed within it. He raised both arms, aiming at Drano's head.

Drano turned back. He saw the pillow and the way Hilger was holding it. Without giving him time to process the information or react in any way, Hilger pressed the trigger. There was the crack of a muffled gunshot, and a small, dark hole appeared in Drano's forehead. His body jerked as though something had shocked him, then he buckled and collapsed to the floor.

The sound of the shot was loud, but not terribly so. The P232 was chambered in .380, a smaller round than the .357 Hilger carried in his primary, a full-size P226. He had chosen the backup just now precisely for its reduced noise profile. And of course the pillow muffled some of the report. Maybe some guy in the next room would look up and wonder what he'd just heard, but when there was no follow-up, he'd happily go back to fucking and sucking and whatever else he was doing that brought him here in the first place.

Drano was lying on his back now, his legs folded under him, his eyes open. A small trickle of blood began to run down his face from the hole in his forehead. Not much, though. The other reason Hilger had selected the P232 was to lessen the chance of the round blowing out the back of Drano's head, which would have made a mess.

Demeere pulled several tissues out of a box on the nightstand, knelt, and, with his thumb, wadded the paper into the forehead hole, stanching the trickle of blood. Hilger nodded slightly in ad-

miration. There was nothing flashy about Demeere. There didn't need to be; he was rock solid. How many men could prevent a mess as calmly as he just did?

Hilger collected and pocketed the spent casing, then decocked the pistol and returned it to his ankle. The room was quiet for a moment while they listened for sounds of disturbance, for any sign that someone might want to investigate. There were none.

Pancho said, "Looks like Drano's gone down the drain."

Pancho and Demeere laughed. Only Guthrie looked at all discomfited. But he hadn't been with Hilger as long as the other men.

"Well," Pancho said, "I'm glad that's done. Been wanting to do it myself."

Hilger nodded. "I should have taken care of it sooner."

"Don't worry about it," Pancho said with a shrug. "It's not the kind of thing I'd want you doing lightly."

They laughed again. After a moment, Hilger said, "We'll pull up the van when we're done. Load him in, take him to the boat, punch holes in him and dump him at sea. We'll be better with just the four of us than we would have been with a weak link like that one."

Everyone nodded. Demeere tossed a blanket over the corpse and sat back on the bed.

"All right," Hilger said, after a moment. "Dox . . . isn't the ultimate objective. If he were, we could take our time. But our interest in him is secondary."

Pancho hunched forward, his head dropping as though he were zeroing in for a knockout. "Access agent, then?"

Hilger nodded. "An unwilling one."

"Who's the primary?" Pancho asked.

Hilger looked at Demeere, who he suspected had already guessed.

Demeere said, "John Rain."

Pancho looked at Hilger. "The freelancer? The one who took out Winters?"

Hilger nodded. "And Calver and Gibbons, too. Those losses were why I had to dig so deep and bring in a mistake like Drano. It's hard to find good people."

Pancho returned his gaze to Demeere. "How'd you know?"

Demeere shook his head to indicate he wasn't privy to any knowledge Pancho lacked. "I didn't. I guessed."

Pancho cracked his knuckles and stared at Demeere as though considering how much credence to give the man's response.

Guthrie said, "Rain . . . this is the Japanese assassin, right?"

Demeere nodded. "Half Japanese. His mother was American. But he looks Japanese. At least, that's what I've heard. I've never seen him. Not many people have."

Hilger said, "I have."

The third time Hilger had used Dox, the man was supposed to eliminate Rain. Dox knew Rain from Afghanistan, a connection Hilger thought would enable the former sniper to get close enough to do the job. He'd gotten close enough, all right, so close that Rain and Dox had joined forces and then in the space of a single year had torn apart two of Hilger's operations. True, it hadn't been personal—neither man had understood what those operations were really about—but Hilger's losses had been considerable. Among other things, he had been forced to abandon the Hong Kong cover he had been living and relocate to Shanghai.

Also, at the disastrous conclusion of that second blown op, Dox had leveled Hilger from behind with a chair launched from the top of a riser of stairs. It could have been worse—if Dox had been properly armed, Hilger would be dead now. As it was, the massive bruise from the impact had lasted for a month; the memory, con-

siderably longer. Hilger couldn't deny that he took some pleasure in imagining how he would soon squeeze Dox for the information he wanted.

Pancho was still staring at Demeere. The half-Mexican was a reliable operator, but prone to feel slighted easily and to react with anger.

Hilger decided to cut short a possible argument. "Demeere was in charge of the op to try to render Rain out of Bangkok. He was running Winters and a local team there. That's how he knew just now. How he guessed."

Pancho eased back an inch on the bed. "How'd it go down?"

"We don't know all the details," Demeere said. "It seems Rain spotted the ambush Winters had set, and attacked. Two of the locals got away. Two others Rain killed with a knife. Winters was found in an alley with defensive wounds on his arms and a slashed subclavian artery. Bled out internally."

"Rain beat Winters in a fucking *knife* fight?" Pancho asked. "I knew Winters. He had a kali background. Trained in the Philippines. He was good with a blade."

"Rain's had a lot of training, too," Hilger said. "Judo. Boxing. Edged weapons when he was with Special Forces. And a hell of a lot of practical experience."

Pancho nodded as though considering. Demeere looked at him and asked, "Does that make you nervous?"

Pancho returned the look. "No."

Demeere offered a slight, chilly smile. "It should."

Pancho smiled back. "Maybe Rain just got lucky. Or maybe Winters wasn't being run properly."

Guthrie said, "Anyway, the point is, Winters was good."

Demeere, his eyes still on Pancho, said in lightly accented but otherwise perfect English, "Fuck-all good."

“What about Calver and Gibbons?” Guthrie asked.

“Shot to death,” Hilger said. “In a Manila restroom, while they were trying to protect an agent in another op.”

Pancho looked at Hilger. “So you’re looking for payback. To take Rain out.”

Hilger shook his head. “I want him to do a job.”

Pancho squinted and pursed his lips as though thinking. Hilger didn’t know whether he was confused or disappointed or both.

“If he’s freelance,” Guthrie asked, “why not just hire him, through channels?”

“Two problems,” Hilger said. “First, I don’t know how to contact him. I tried to locate him, and couldn’t even find where he is. At one point he was known to be in Tokyo, then supposedly in São Paulo or Rio. The reports are all several years out of date, though, and I doubt he’s still living in either country. And even if he were, it wouldn’t be enough to go on. Brazil has the world’s largest Japanese expatriate community. Rain would be invisible there. More so in Japan. He always kept a low profile, but these days he might as well be a ghost.”

Guthrie said, “What’s the second problem?”

Hilger shrugged. “For now, let’s just say that I doubt what I want him for is something he’d do voluntarily. Dox is his friend, one of only a few. That means Dox knows how to contact him, and it means Dox is the leverage to make Rain cooperate.”

“They’re that close?” Guthrie said.

Hilger nodded. “I saw Dox carry Rain over his shoulder out of a firefight at Kwai Chung harbor in Hong Kong. Five million dollars in play, and Dox walked away from it to save his partner when he got hit. So I’d say they’re close, yeah.”

Pancho said, “What you’ve got in mind, the thing you want Rain for, you can’t handle in-house?”

Again, Hilger detected disappointment. He shook his head. "Rain is the right resource for this. We just have to get to him."

They were all quiet for a moment. Guthrie said, "How much time do we have, then? To snatch Dox."

Hilger shuffled through a few more of the photos, looking for a pattern. He felt something beginning to cohere.

"We can give it a few more days," Hilger said. "If we haven't had an opening at that point, we can work the villa angle. But I agree with Pancho, it's high risk and I'd prefer something else. The main thing is that we take him totally unaware. Because without the element of surprise, taking him alive and functioning is going to be bloody. Close quarters he's not Rain, but believe me, he's plenty dangerous."

Pancho squinted. "Rain is that good?"

Hilger nodded, remembering how Rain had tracked him to Hong Kong. No one had ever turned the tables on Hilger like that before, and Hilger knew he was lucky to have survived it. The experience had spooked him, he had to admit, and for this, along with his more concrete rationales, he wasn't going to let Rain continue to roam the earth when the current operation was done.

"He must be getting old," Guthrie said. "He's a Vietnam vet, isn't he?"

Hilger nodded. "He went in late, though, when he was seventeen, so he's young for that conflict. But even if his best years are past him, tell me, do you know of anyone else who's survived in this business, on his own, with no organization to protect him, for as long as Rain?"

The room was silent.

"There's a reason he's survived all this time," Hilger went on. "And it's not luck. No one stays lucky that long. It's because he's good. He's better than all the people he's killed, and he's killed

plenty—more than we have all together. So you don't want to think of him as old, or slow, or used up, or burnt out, or anything else he wants you to think so you'll underestimate him. You do, and you'll wind up another one of his statistics."

"Like Winters," Demeere said.

"Like Winters," Hilger said, looking at each of them. "We don't want any more losses like that. So we're going to be patient for a few more days. With three of us on motorcycles and one in the van, we can cover the likely spots and converge quickly on wherever Dox is spotted. Like Guthrie said, Ubud's not that big a town."

Everyone nodded, accepting the matter as settled, at least temporarily. Pancho tilted his head toward the body on the floor. "You want me to bring around the van?"

Hilger nodded and started to collect the surveillance photos. They all stood.

Guthrie asked, "Where do you think we'll spot him?"

Hilger considered one of the photos. "Look at this guy. If he weren't such a good sniper, he'd probably be playing professional football. How much does a guy like this eat every day?"

Demeere smiled and said, "Plenty."

Hilger nodded. "Exactly. I don't know what kind of food supplies he's got laid in, but sooner or later, he's going to have to go out for more. That's what we're waiting for."

DOX WOKE WITH a long, pleasant groan. He stretched out across the king bed, curling his toes, liking the feel of the cotton sheets against his body. From the sun on the gauze curtains, it must have been past seven. He'd slept late. But why not? He wasn't on a job. He deserved to take it easy. Taking it easy was what Bali was all about. Hell, it was why he'd come here. It was why he'd built this villa.

He got up and walked naked across the sisal rug to the bathroom to take a leak. It was funny, when he'd first imagined this place, he thought it would be the ultimate bachelor pad. But now that it was done, he found he was reluctant to share it. Bedding down with someone inside a place he'd built himself would feel more intimate than he was ready for. Or rather, he hadn't met anyone yet who he was ready to be that intimate with. He wanted to meet someone good, someone right, but of the many women he'd known and enjoyed, he just couldn't get that close with any of them. There was Rain's lady, of course, Delilah, and a man would have to be gay or in a coma not to have some kind of thing for her, but even acknowledging to yourself that you had a hankering for

your bro's woman was a dangerous thing. And doing anything to act on it would be an unpardonable sin, not to mention a declaration of war against the kind of man you'd have to be insane to want for an enemy.

Anyway, it wasn't like he pined for Delilah or anything like that. It was more like, she was just the kind of woman he wished he could meet. Smart, confident, and of course drop-dead gorgeous. Semi-mysterious, with a tasty little edge to keep you on your toes. Like what Angelina Jolie might be if she were blond and had taken up spy work for the Mossad instead of acting.

Well, he'd keep looking. And it wasn't like he was suffering in the meantime. He had a couple of honeys tucked away in Kuta, only an hour away, and several in Bangkok and Jakarta who went into paroxysms whenever he called to say he was coming to town.

He finished urinating, then looked at himself in the mirror. He liked what he saw: just shy of six feet and a solid two hundred twenty-five pounds, with a six-pack and no fat other than a pair of moderate love handles the ladies seemed to find endearing. Exercise was the key. He liked to do something different every day: weights, the jump rope, a Cross Fit routine, some kettlebell stuff he'd learned from the Russians and bodyweight exercises Rain had shown him. He figured his body looked about ten years younger than the forty he actually was, which was good. He wanted to be able to keep chasing twenty-five-year-olds for as long as possible without feeling like a dirty old man.

He knew he wouldn't be able to maintain himself forever, but that didn't really bother him. He didn't care if he lost his hair, either, although at this point it didn't look like he was going to. There were only two things he would miss, when the time came: being able to take out a dime-size target at five hundred yards in low light, and getting it up as quick as a fourteen-year-old with a

can of Crisco and a Carmen Electra video. Young enough to get wood right away, but old enough to last pretty much as long as he wanted, that was the best thing about being forty. Waiting to come until you'd given some pretty lady as much pleasure as she could stand, until she was practically dying from it and begging you for mercy, well, if there was a better high than that on this earth, he'd like to know what it could be.

Of course, when that day came, when his hands got shaky and his pecker turned weak, he'd have to remind himself he was lucky. Not everyone lived long enough to have to deal with such eventualities. He was planning to, but you never really knew. The main thing was to enjoy yourself while you could, because in the end, everybody's moment was brief. Especially in the line of work he was in.

He walked over to the window and opened the curtain, letting the sun warm his body. God, what a vista. Nothing but blue skies, white clouds, and green rice fields dotted with coconut trees. He loved standing here and surveying his realm, not just because the view was so good, but because this was one of the few places in the world where he felt comfortable silhouetting himself this way. He'd taken out enough people through the glass of their own windows to have developed a permanent shyness about any room with a view. Sure, he could have spent a lifetime in therapy doing successive aversion training or some other bullshit to get over his nervousness, or he could just have all his windows custom-built out of aluminum oxynitride by a company called Surmet. They called their product ALON and it could stop multiple .50 caliber armor-piercing rounds, meaning an ordinary sniper bullet had about the same chance of getting through as a mosquito. How did those MasterCard ads go? "Aluminum oxynitride bullet-resistant

glass—ten dollars a square inch. Peace of mind that no one's about to blow your brains out with a scoped rifle—priceless.”

He pulled on shorts and a tee-shirt and spent an hour hitting the weights in his first-floor exercise room, then showered and made himself a giant protein smoothie for breakfast. A cup of milk, a couple bananas, papayas, mangos, and four raw eggs. The eggs were his last, he noted—he'd have to pick up some more. And he was getting low on fruit, too.

He drank it all down while using the laptop he kept on the kitchen table to catch up on the latest horseshit in the Middle East and elsewhere. A long time ago he'd been troubled over the way he'd left the Marines, but these days you couldn't pay him enough to be part of the government. The hypocrisy of it all was enough to make you sick. He wondered how people could stand for it. If he were a philosopher king or a benevolent dictator, the only jobs he thought he might enjoy more than his current occupation, he'd have a rule that you could only authorize a war if you were actually going to go off and fight it. That'd get the politicians singing “Kumbaya” right quick.

When he was done with breakfast and the news, he checked the URL that ran a live feed from the four CCTV cameras he had positioned around the house. Everything was normal. Not that he was expecting any visitors, of course, but a little extra assurance never hurt anyone. He wished he could get a dog—for security, a low-tech little yapper was hard to beat—but he traveled too much for it to be feasible. Maybe if he settled down a little more, found a brown-skinned woman with almond-shaped eyes. Get her pregnant, raise a family, teach the kids to hunt and fish and shoot like he could. Yeah, maybe one day.

Getting dressed to go out in Bali didn't usually mean much—

this morning, just shorts, a tee-shirt, and sandals. He would have preferred to accessorize with a baby Glock or one of the other pistols he kept handy, but you always had to weigh accessibility, concealability, the likelihood of need, and the likelihood of getting busted for violating Indonesia's draconian gun laws. This morning, he felt the balance was against the Glock. But that didn't mean he would be unarmed: he put a Spyderco Clipit Civilian in his front right pocket and hung a Fred Perrin La Griffe with a two-inch spear-point blade around his neck inside the shirt. He grabbed the big backpack he used for groceries, opened the garage, and took out his motorcycle, a 250cc wine-colored Honda Rebel, beat-up, dirty, and reliable as hell.

It was still morning but it was already getting hot, and the air was plenty sticky. He stood there for a moment, just appreciating the feeling of another day in paradise. He liked everything about it, the smell of the mud, even of the duck excrement that fertilized the paddies. It didn't smell like shit to him at all, it smelled like life, real life far away from all the places covered in concrete and asphalt and choking on diesel. It smelled like the earth itself.

He pulled on his helmet, hating the thing as always because of the heat. The locals didn't always adhere to Indonesia's helmet ordinances, but as an obvious foreigner he found it best to do what he could to avoid standing out, especially when standing out meant disrespecting the host country's laws.

There was no driveway as such; just a quarter-mile-long dirt road. He fired up the bike and motored slowly forward, looking around automatically as he moved, noting the hot spots, checking to see if anything seemed out of order, if anything rubbed him the wrong way. There was no good way to get to him at the villa, which was half the point of its location and design, but the least worst place for an ambush would be somewhere along this road,

and so he was always extra alert coming and going here. But nothing was at all amiss this morning, just the usual dogs barking agreeably in the background, the usual farmers sweating at their labors amid the thigh-high rice.

He turned right at the end of the road and picked up speed. A 250cc bike was small for a guy his size, but it's what everyone around here used and the roads were too narrow and winding to go very fast anyway.

He pulled into the parking lot of the Bintang supermarket on Jalan Raya Ubud and killed the engine. The Bintang was in a two-story stone building with a wood-and-red-tile roof, surrounded by ferns and bamboo trees. It was by far the biggest market in town, and the one Dox liked when he needed more than just a few supplies. Out front were the usual complement of motorbikes, bicycles, and cars. A small dog, one of the scores that roamed Ubud unsupervised, lay in the shade under the front awning, conserving its energy in the gathering tropical heat.

Inside the store, a couple of mothers with diapered toddlers in tow prowled the cramped aisles, shopping for tonight's dinner, a few household supplies, maybe a bit of candy to keep the baby smiling. Dox had nowhere special to go, and spent a leisurely half-hour moving methodically through the store and loading up a small cart. When he was done, he rolled up to the register, where a pretty girl he knew as Wan was working.

"How are you today, Mr. Dox?" the girl asked him with a beautiful Bali smile.

Dox smiled back, but kept a little distance in his expression. Wan was a tasty-looking little treat, no question, but a sensible man knew not to shit where he ate. Or in this case, shopped. Besides, he could get all he wanted and more an hour away, in Kuta and Sanur.

“Fine, Wan, and how about you? Putting up okay with the heat?”

The girl laughed, her eyes sparkling. “Oh, Mr. Dox, this isn’t hot today, you know that.”

He made a show of mopping his brow. “Darlin’, you’re tougher than I am.”

The groceries cost him a whopping four hundred thousand rupiah—about forty bucks. He wondered if anyone had ever done a study on the prospects of countries where buying groceries cost half a million of the local unit of currency. He doubted there was much correlation between economic health and all those zeros.

He loaded the groceries into his backpack, shouldered it, said goodbye to Wan, and headed outside.

A foreigner, a big blond dude, was pacing in front of the building near where Dox had parked the Honda, a mobile phone to his ear. He was wearing shades and speaking a language Dox didn’t recognize—not German, not French, Dutch, maybe? When he looked up and saw Dox, he closed the phone and smiled.

“Hello, maybe you can help me,” he said, with a slight, indeterminate accent. “Do you speak English?”

“Depends on who you ask,” Dox said. The guy seemed like your typical lost European tourist—not exactly an unknown species in the area—but still, Dox immediately glanced left and right. The perimeter check was a learned reflex, triggered whenever a stranger tried to engage him. The danger is that the person asking for directions, or the time, or a light, or whatever, is there to distract you from his cohorts, who are flanking you from your blind side, and Dox wasn’t about to get caught that way.

To Dox’s left, a guy in a full-face motorcycle helmet was leaning against the wall under the awning, doing nothing in particu-

lar. On the right—another guy in a full-face helmet, moving leisurely in Dox's direction.

Later, his conscious mind would articulate all the factors that his unconscious had just instantly, wordlessly spotted and assessed. He would be able to describe what was wrong with this picture: the positions of the guys in the helmets relative to the blond dude; the way they were waiting in places in which they had no ostensible reason to wait; that they were wearing helmets in the heat even though they were off their bikes; how smoothly and deliberately the one on the right was closing the distance.

But for now, his understanding took the form only of a sudden heat in his gut. He knew the feeling. He especially knew not to doubt it. A single word—*fuck!*—blaring in his mind like a klaxon, he braced and reached for the Civilian.

The blond guy moved—much faster than Dox thought he'd be able to, given his size. He took a long step forward and pivoted, and then his right foot crashed into Dox's midsection like a freight train.

Dox had just enough time to react by tightening his stomach, and that saved him from having the wind knocked out of him entirely. But the kick still blasted him backward and cost him his grip on the knife. The Civilian clattered to the ground, and Dox struggled to regain his balance. A part of him understood that he was already far behind, that whatever this was, it was going very badly.

One of the guys in helmets latched onto his right wrist. Dox found his footing, pivoted, and smashed his free elbow into the guy's head. If he had connected with the guy's skull the blow might have killed him, or at least knocked him off, but the helmet kept the guy in the game, and now he was dragging on Dox's arm, trying to pull him off balance. Dox spun clockwise, getting behind

the guy, sucking him in close with his giant forearm, and reached under the tee-shirt with his left hand. He pulled free the La Griffe, its ring handle encircling his first two fingers and its razor-sharp blade protruding from his fist like a claw. But before he could get it under helmet boy's chin and rip out his throat, the blond guy had wrapped himself around Dox's left arm, both hands securing the wrist. Something stung Dox in the neck from behind and he knew with a sickening lurch what it was. He struggled against the men on his arms. They felt heavier, and his vision blurred. He staggered and thought, *John, fuck, I'm sorry*. And then he was gone.

I SHOULD HAVE known they'd get to me through Dox. He was no soft target, true, but he was easier than I am, and a little easier is sometimes all it takes.

I was living with Delilah in Paris at the time. Or living with her separately, you could say. Her job was such that security required different apartments, and various other minor inconveniences. Although I suppose that when half the romance is a retired contract killer and the other half a committed Mossad agent, separate dwellings can be the least of your troubles.

I liked Paris, liked almost everything about it. Along with Barcelona, where I'd spent a month with Delilah a year earlier, it was as beautiful a city as I've ever seen, the architecture and the open spaces and the endlessly walkable streets. I loved the coffee culture, and relished a place where I could indulge my enthusiasm for the bean in an endless profusion of sidewalk cafés. I wondered at little mysteries, like the abandoned bicycles chained to the park gates at the place des Vosges, slumped insensate against their shackles, their wheels bent and broken, like crippled pets whose owners cared too much to kill them and who compromised in-

stead by leaving them to die. I thought of the generations that had visited the city before me, dreamers and cynics, romantics and radicals, the ones who had come here to find something, and the ones who wanted only to forget what they had lost or left behind.

I'd never been to Paris before, and when I first arrived, my impressions were all secondhand. I expected an ambience born of architecture, romance, history, gustation. I pictured the Louvre and its glass pyramid; the Seine and Notre Dame; intellectuals arguing over philosophy and smoking ceaselessly in clusters of Left Bank cafés.

What I saw on the train ride from the airport, therefore, was unsettling. Paris, it seemed, was besieged, ringed with tenement towns not unlike Rio's favelas. Many of these were walled off, at least from the highways and the train tracks, and the gray concrete barriers, some topped with razor wire, were covered, every inch of them, with ugly, angry graffiti, like sea walls braced against a seething tide. By the time I arrived at Gare du Nord in Paris proper, the graffitied walls had abated, but their import lingered: this was a civilization encircled by its enemies, living uneasily under some implicit, eroding truce, slowly losing a war the signs of which were everywhere but that its citizens preferred to ignore.

I took a small apartment on rue Beautreillis in the Fourth Arrondissement, the same block where Jim Morrison had once lived, on the edge of the Marais. The rent was high, but I'd walked away from an operation in Japan a year earlier with two million tax-free dollars, and I could afford it. I liked the feel of the neighborhood, the glow of its streetlamps, the sounds of laughter and conversation from its bars and bistros. In a strange way, the area reminded me in its intimacy of Sengoku, the Tokyo neighborhood I'd been forced to leave a thousand years earlier.

Delilah's work kept her busy, and we had to be careful about seeing each other regardless, so I had ample time alone. That was good: partly because being alone suits me; partly because in Paris it gave me time to adjust to the new sensation of having someone in my life. It wasn't just the unfamiliarity of plans several times a week—dinner at Le Petit Célestin on the quai des Célestins; a walk on the narrow streets of the Ile Saint-Louis; a night at my apartment; sometimes a night at hers. It was the whole notion, the feeling, of being someplace primarily because of another person's presence there. There was a lot I liked about that feeling, but it was taking me a while to get used to it, and I was glad circumstances permitted me to go slowly. I used the time alone to explore the city, and read, and practice French with tapes. It was my fourth language, after Japanese, English, and Portuguese, and I remembered some of it from high school. It was coming back quickly.

I'd been telling myself for a long time that I wanted out of the life, but it was only recently, with Delilah, that the longing had become real. For a while, she had been heading in the same direction. Her organization blamed her for losing a colleague, an assassin called Gil, in an otherwise successful terrorist takedown in Hong Kong, and was set to cut her loose. But she'd faced them down and forced her way back in, and now she was more determined than ever to stay.

I was ambivalent about her work. On the one hand, it gave me space, which I liked. On the other hand, her continued presence in the life inhibited my own efforts to leave it. Part of it was the behavioral cues—the need for a ready cover story when I was with her in case she ran into someone she knew, and her routine perimeter checks and other tactics—which continued to remind me of who I'd always been. Part of it was ongoing operational ne-

cessity, because as long as she was in the life, she was at risk, and if you're with someone at risk, you'd better believe you're at risk, too. And part of it was notional: if I was this involved with someone still in the life, how far could I have left the life behind?

I pushed her sometimes, but not too hard. I'd learned Delilah was a fighter, and if she felt she was being doubted, or second-guessed, or in any way talked down to, she had a tendency to come out swinging.

"Why not retire?" I asked her once, over café-crèmes and croissants at *Le Loir dans la Théière*, a restaurant on the rue des Rosiers named after the dormouse in the teacup in *Alice in Wonderland*. Delilah had introduced me to the place, and I loved the mismatched chairs and small wooden tables, the eclectic wall art, the wonderful smell of years of fresh ground coffee. "We could buy an apartment on the beach in Barcelona. Make love to the sounds of the waves at night, walk on the beach in the morning. Nothing but the feel of the sun and the smell of coffee and cava and no bad memories."

She smiled and pushed back a strand of blond hair. Her blue eyes were lit by sunlight coming through the restaurant's large front windows. "You make it sound enticing. Especially the making love part."

"That was my favorite, too."

She laughed. "I don't know, John. I don't know."

I took a sip of coffee and watched her. I liked it when she called me John. My Rolodex is slim, and the few people in it tend not to use my first name. Midori had called me Jun, short for Junichi, my Japanese given name, and at the time I had liked that very much, too. But that was before she had betrayed me to protect our infant son, and thereby denied me a part in his life.

Among the bad memories I had just mentioned, Midori held a prominent position.

“What would you do if you were doing something else?” I asked. “If you’d never gotten into the life. Do you ever think about that?”

“Sometimes,” she allowed.

“What would it be?”

“I don’t know,” she said again. “Maybe fashion photography. That’s the cover I’ve been living in Paris, and I like it. I suppose I could have done it for real.”

“Then do it now.”

She took my hand. “You know I can’t. Iran is poised to go nuclear, we have Hamas in the territories and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Things are going to get worse before they get better, if they ever get better at all. I can’t just walk away to photograph anorexic girls on catwalks.”

“Is that all you’d be walking away for?”

“You know what I mean.”

I tried again one evening as we stood pressed together on Pont Sully, taking in the glowing lights of the Ile Saint-Louis and the illuminated buttresses of Notre Dame. “Your organization is using you,” I told her. “You’ve said so yourself. Why don’t you just walk away?”

I felt her stiffen, and she took a half-step back. “I’ve told you before,” she said, looking at me. “The ‘organization’ isn’t the point. This is about my country. My people.”

I shook my head. “I don’t buy it. I think this is about you standing up to the men who blamed you for Gil getting killed in Hong Kong. Showing them you’re tougher than they are, that they can’t drive you out.”

“Why does everything have to be so one dimensional with you? Yes, I have personal reasons for staying. My dignity is involved, fine, I admit it. But why can’t you at least acknowledge there are other reasons, too?”

“Because . . .”

“I’ll tell you why. It’s because you’ve never been tied to anything larger than yourself. You don’t believe in anything. So you can’t imagine someone who does. She must be either deluded or lying or naive.”

I felt myself flush. “I understand your selfless reasons better than you know. I also understand the more devotion you give to the organization or the corps or the country, the more it’ll hollow you out when you realize your love was always unrequited. The more you’ll feel betrayed.”

We were quiet for a moment. She said, “It doesn’t have to be that way for everyone.”

“You know anyone whose experience has been different?”

We stared at each other. Her eyes were narrowed and her nostrils flared slightly with her breathing. That’s the way it was with us. We could go from bliss and harmony to anger and recriminations as fast and with as little warning as a tropical storm. What made it bearable, what made it good, was that the foul weather would pass with equal suddenness, usually leaving something glorious in its wake.

“Anyway,” I said, “I am tied to something larger than myself. I’m tied to you.”

Her eyes softened. Then she stepped in close and kissed me. I turned my head away, still irritated, but she reached up and turned me back. I resisted for another moment, mostly for form’s sake, and then gave in.

We stood like that for a minute or so, and the kiss grew into something more. I could feel her breasts, the heat of her skin, and suddenly I wanted badly to be alone with her someplace.

She broke the kiss and hooked her fingers through my belt. "Let's go to your apartment," she said. "We can fight better there."

We did. And things were good again, until next time, when the pattern would repeat itself.

But between the periodic swings from bitter argument to sweet resolution, things were mostly good. I haven't been deeply involved with many women, but among them, only Delilah really knew about, and accepted, what I was beginning to try to think of as my past. The surprising depth of our mutual chemistry, and the improbability of the romance it led to, was a quiet miracle for me. Delilah shared with me intimacies that I sensed came from the deepest places within her, aspects of her mind and her body that by long habit she had learned to protect ferociously and that she conceded now only slowly, cautiously, with fear-tinged hope.

I found myself opening up with her, as well. I'd meant it when I told her I was getting attached. I'd been alone so long, I'd learned to conceive of myself that way, but slowly and strangely, my conception of myself was beginning to include someone else. Sometimes the attachment scared me, and felt like a burden. Other times it seemed like a life raft, or at least like ballast. Either way, it was real, and deepening.

But one thing I didn't share with Delilah was the onset of periodic . . . anxiety attacks, for want of a better description. Occasionally, I would get so lost in a book in a café that I would neglect to look up when I heard someone come in, or so lost in thought on a morning stroll that I'd suddenly realize an entire minute had elapsed and I hadn't checked my back. At those moments, I'd be

gripped by a kind of horror, the feeling you get if you accidentally run a red light at full speed and miraculously manage to breeze through the intersection unscathed. You can tell yourself no harm, no foul, but still you know you fucked up, that in another universe you were annihilated by a truck coming from your left, or you mowed down a young mother stepping off the curb, or were overtaken by some similar catastrophe. A primal part of your mind screams, *How could you be so careless? Do you want to die?*

I was used to living with fear, and there was always a reason for it, typically that someone was trying to kill me. Now that the causes of fear were growing distant, the fear itself diminishing, anxiety was filling the vacuum. Had I been afraid so long that I needed something to be afraid of, something the fear could focus on?

I tried taking long walks at night, the more deserted the streets, the better. There was an area in the Eighteenth Arrondissement, known as La Goutte d'Or, near Barbès, that I particularly favored. Decorated with the incinerated husks of cars the locals had torched, and inhabited by dealers, beggars, and illegals from the Maghreb, the area had a dangerous, desperate edge that kept me on my toes. Its street denizens would observe me as I moved through, not knowing what to make of me. I was in France, but my face was Japanese; my attire was civilian, but my vibe was anything but. Aside from occasional offers of drugs, they mostly left me alone.

Once, a tall Moroccan with a shaved head and ears weighed down by multiple metal studs started pacing me from behind while I walked. I calmly glanced back at him, and at the two friends trailing in his wake, to let them know I was aware of their presence, and to signal thereby that I wasn't afraid, stupid, or likely to be easy. He mistook my cautionary glance as an opening,

though, and called out to me in Moroccan-accented French, “What you doing here, man? You want to buy something? I help you find it. What you want?”

I checked the area to ensure I wasn’t being flanked, then stopped and turned to him. “I’m not what you’re looking for,” I said in French.

But he kept coming. He might have been too stupid to have understood my signals. Or maybe he had decided to resolve his cognitive dissonance over my appearance and vibe by more closely examining me, rather than just shrugging and moving on.

“No, man,” he said. “Wait up. I just want to help.”

His friends were fanning out now, moving toward my flanks. I felt adrenaline churn through my system, and damn if its hot rush wasn’t almost sweet. I checked my rear again. All clear.

It was going to be a fast interview, I could tell. One, maybe two more questions to distract me and confirm my vulnerability; a sucker punch to drop me and signal his friends to move in; a joyous multiple stomping; then off with my wallet, watch, and anything else I would no longer be needing.

“It’s cool,” he said, coming into range. “I know you come for something here in La Goutte. I want . . .”

Most people find it hard to do two things at once, like complete a sentence and avoid a palm heel to the nose. Which was why I nailed him that way in mid-thought. It wasn’t the world’s hardest shot, but as a simple setup, it didn’t need to be. It just needed to disrupt his focus and rock him back onto his heels. Which it did.

I stepped past him, my right hand catching his throat in an eagle claw grip and my right leg sweeping both his legs from under him. But for the throat grab and substitution of concrete for a mat, it was pretty much the classic *osoto-gari*, or big outer leg reap,

I had performed hundreds of thousands of times in my years at the Kodokan. Basic, but still one of my favorite throws.

For a split second, Mr. Helper was suspended horizontally. Then he was accelerating downward, assisted substantially by the downward force I was exerting on his neck. The back of his skull blasted into the sidewalk with a resounding *crack*, like the sound a thick book makes when someone slams it closed.

Palming the folding knife I had clipped to my front pocket, I checked my perimeter. Still clear. I took a step toward his two friends, who were rooted in place. "Do you still want to help me?" I asked, my voice calm.

"No, man," one of them answered, his hands raised palms out in supplication. They started backing away. "It's cool, man."

I checked the papers the next day, and there was nothing about a killing in La Goutte. So Mr. Helper must have had a hard head. The only downside of the whole thing, from my perspective, was that prudence required I steer clear of the area for a while.

There were other places, though, and I continued to visit them at night. Still, the nocturnal prowling helped only so much. Situational awareness for countering potential street crime is one thing. The fever pitch alertness required to survive professionals who are patiently, dispassionately, specifically, maneuvering to take your life is something else. If you're addicted to the latter, and maybe I was, the former is no more than an occasional dose of methadone in the face of a long-term heroin habit.

As my relationship with Delilah deepened, and as I gradually eased myself away from the mindset you need to survive in the life, it was as though the part of myself that was so adept in dangerous environments, the part that had kept me alive in the jungle in Vietnam and then in countless urban jungles afterward, didn't like what was going on. That killer inside me, that iceman

who could always do what needed to be done, felt he was being marginalized, disenfranchised. But what could I do? I didn't know how to propitiate him, or even if I could. All I knew was that he was deadly, as deadly as anyone I've ever known, and capable of almost anything if he felt his survival required it. I could feel him looking for a reason, a rationale, an excuse to come surging back and shove me out of the way.

Someone who needed him, say. Someone in danger. Someone like Dox.