

THE OFFICIAL PREQUEL TO *HITMAN: ABSOLUTION*

The central figure is a bald man with a stern expression, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and red tie. He is holding a silver handgun in his right hand, which is wearing a black glove. The background is a deep red with a faint, repeating pattern of classical figures.

HITMAN™

D A M N A T I O N

RAYMOND BENSON

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PROLOGUE

The important thing was to keep Agent 47 alive.

That's what Diana Burnwood had told herself for years, even though it wasn't the Agency's prime directive for handlers. The unwritten law was that operators in the field had to be disavowed and abandoned if there was the slightest danger of the Agency being compromised. And yet Diana had always felt a connection to 47—as much as it was possible for that anyone could bond with the man. She wanted him to succeed in his various missions, and she took great pains to watch his back. It was her job.

Well, it *was* her job.

Diana planned to disappear after the current hit was completed. She had no choice. Considering what she was intending to do, the Agency would stop at nothing to eliminate her. The escape route was in place and the travel plans were set in stone. She would vanish for a while and then make her move. Returning to the laboratory in Chicago would be terribly perilous, but it was absolutely essential for her to snatch the “package” and spirit it away from the Agency.

The trouble started when Benjamin Travis was appointed to be her superior. Diana was immediately at odds with the guy. Although not the ultimate boss of the International Contract Agency, Travis had proven himself to be a more than competent manager. He was tough, opinionated, intelligent, and ambitious. It was no wonder he had been promoted to his current position. Diana held no grudge against the man for that.

What she didn't like about Travis was that he was an unethical and dangerous asshole.

When Diana had confronted him about his new classified pet project, noting that it would cost many innocent lives, Travis scoffed and said, “Really? This, coming from a handler of an assassin? Give me a break, Burnwood. You alone have caused collateral damage in the hundreds. Don't go all high-and-mighty on me all of a sudden.”

Normally she would have let it go and moved on. This time, however, the implications of Travis's venture were more than simply disturbing. In her opinion, the man was threatening the integrity of the Agency.

Diana was already working on the Himalayan assignment with 47 when she had decided to take action. Originally she wanted to wait until the mission was completed, but the situation had become too volatile. Something had to be done quickly, and she had decided to risk her life to take the package and run. But first she had to go off the grid for a while and carefully plan her next move.

Did they realize she had betrayed them? Most likely. She knew they would come for her at any moment. She should have left Paris hours ago, but she owed it to 47 to see him through the current operation.

Finish the job and then get out quickly.

She opened her laptop and switched it on. The encryption software was already in place, there was no way anyone could hack into her network. As she connected to the satellite over Nepal, Diana checked the small video monitors once again. The two miniature cameras she had installed in the hotel hallway outside her room were undetectable and state of the art. They each pointed in an opposite direction, so she could see anyone who happened to appear

in the corridor. A third camera, mounted near the elevators and stairwell, would alert her to any newcomers on the floor. It wasn't perfect by any means, but at least the three monitors on the desk would give her fair warning should she come under attack.

The comlink securely connected to the satellite's signal. An image of a snowcapped mountain materialized on the laptop—Kangchenjunga, one of the most difficult climbs in the Himalayas. Diana checked her watch. Just after six in the morning. That meant it was close to one o'clock there. Nepal Standard Time was unusual in that it was offset by forty-five minutes from Coordinated Universal Time. If she was correct in her calculations, then 47 would be in place and waiting for her.

She zoomed in to the blinking beacon on the side of the peak. The homer 47 carried was undetectable to the naked eye but easily picked up by the satellite. *Quite ingenious, actually*, Diana thought. The Agency did indeed have cool toys.

Another marvel the satellite provided was the ability to analyze physical structure, whether they were man-made or natural. In this case, the program detected where the rock surface of the mountainside ended and the thick layers of snow began, so that she could easily identify areas susceptible to avalanches.

"Hello, 47," she said into her headset. "Do you read me?"

"Loud and clear," came the reply. There was no inflection of warmth or pleasure that he had recognized her refined British accent. Typical of the hitman. He was a man of few words and absolutely no emotion.

"Is the target in place?" she asked.

"Can't you see them?"

She moved the camera down the cliff and spotted the Chinese climbing party, some six or seven hundred feet below 47's perch.

"Affirmative. How was the climb?"

"Cold."

"All your carabiners and belay devices worked all right?"

"Yes."

"Have you done much mountain climbing, 47?"

"Where do I place the boomer?"

She smiled to herself. Agent 47 always cut to the chase. "The computer is calculating the angle as we speak. Wait ... okay, here it is. You're very close. Move about forty yards to the east. You'll find yourself on a ledge of what looks like ice, but it's really very compact snow. That'll do nicely, and it's right over the target's head."

"I see what you mean. Give me a few minutes to work my way over there."

Diana watched the tiny figure use a rope, a pickax, and a series of carabiners to maneuver sideways across the face of the cliff. She admired how 47 seemed to be able to do anything. He was a superb athlete, trained to work in all the elements. Of course, he was genetically engineered to be a superman of sorts. Diana often wondered how strong his tolerance for pain and fatigue really was. The climb must have been terribly difficult, especially alone. Luckily, he wasn't so high in altitude that the helicopter she had arranged to pick him up couldn't reach him. If he had been another thousand feet farther up, 47 would have had to descend Kangchenjunga the hard way.

Then she saw them.

Diana furrowed her brow and squinted. She quickly maneuvered the mouse and zoomed closer.

Two men. Almost directly above 47.

“47, I see two hostiles, maybe two hundred feet at one o’clock.” She focused the camera on the men as tightly as it would go. “They’re Chinese, all right.”

“I’m not surprised,” 47 said. “I suspected the target sent a scouting party up the mountain to precede his own expedition. He wanted to make sure the path was safe. They don’t like Nam Vo too much around here. Do they see me?”

“I can’t tell. I don’t think so ... Wait—they’re on the move. They must know you’re there.”

“How much time do I have before they’re within shooting range?”

“Plenty. Just get the boomer in place and get the hell out of there. The helicopter will—”

A movement on one of the camera monitors caught her attention. Someone had come out of the elevator on her floor. No—two someones. They paused for a moment as the stairwell door opened and two more men came into view. They were dressed in suits and appeared to be ordinary businessmen, until one of them dropped a large bag on the floor and opened it.

“Diana?” 47 asked. “Are you there?”

“Hold on a second, 47,” she snapped.

One of the men pulled out four Kevlar vests, which the quartet began to don.

No!

The Agency had found her.

No time to lose. She immediately severed the satellite link, pulled the plug on her laptop, and rose from the desk.

The men on the monitor armed themselves with assault rifles, M16s from the look of them.

Diana quickly grabbed her laptop and small traveling bag, which was packed and ready to go. She moved to the fire-escape window, opened it, and tossed the computer outside. The machine fell six floors and smashed to pieces on the ground below. She glanced back at the monitors on the desk and saw that the men were creeping quietly toward her room. Diana then tossed her bag out the window and watched it drop to the pavement. No damage; there was nothing inside but clothes, passports, and money.

As the men kicked in the hotel-room door, Diana was already out on the fire-escape landing. The tall redhead, dressed in an expensive Versace suit, scampered in her bare feet down the metal stairs toward the street below. She heard shouts above her.

Faster!

She took three steps at a time. When she got to the first-floor landing, one of the men shouted, “There she is!” Diana took hold of the railing, deftly catapulted her body over it, and dropped twenty feet to the ground. She landed hard on the soles of her feet, winced with the pain, and kept moving.

That’s when the gunfire began.

She grabbed her bag, rounded the corner of the hotel, and ran into the traffic on the street. Drivers slammed on the brakes and honked horns. Bullets whizzed past her, dotting the pavement in her wake. By the time she was on the other side of Rue Froissart, the men were in hot pursuit down the fire escape.

Diana ducked into the Metro entrance at the corner, practically flew down the steps, and reached the platform as the train pulled in to the station. The timing couldn’t have been more

perfect. She climbed aboard the train, pushed her way through the crowd of passengers, found a seat, and collapsed into it. The doors closed and she was away. Opening her bag, she found the Prada heels and put them on. Now she was just another ordinary classy Parisienne commuting through the busy city. She was confident that the Agency would not be able to trace her movements once she got to her destination. The route was secure and airtight. Perhaps fate really was on her side.

She took a deep breath and then felt a pang of regret. She hadn't meant to abandon 47, but she'd had no choice.

Sorry, old friend, she thought. I hope you'll understand one day. Send positive thoughts my way if you're capable of doing such a thing.

Goodbye—and good luck.

TWELVE MONTHS LATER

It was always a variation of the same dream.

This time I was, what, thirteen years old? Yes. Thirteen. I recognized the asylum's corridors and passed a framed portrait of my father—one of them, anyway—Dr. Ort-Meyer. I saw my reflection in the glass, and it was how I remembered myself at that age.

But where was everyone? The asylum was empty. My footsteps echoed as if I were in a cavern.

I thought to myself that I should run. He was coming, but I hadn't perceived him yet. Usually I felt him coming. It was a sensation I was unable to describe, but I knew he was there. Just around the corner. Coming for me.

So I ran.

And then he was behind me, appearing out of nowhere. I could practically smell him. I could feel the coldness. It was always cold when he was nearby.

I dared to look over my shoulder as I ran. The dark figure was faceless, as usual. Almost as if I were only a shadow, but I knew better.

He was Death.

No question about it. Death had been coming for me in my dreams for a long time now.

I ran faster. I was fairly certain I could stay ahead of him, but the temperature around me grew colder. He was closer. How did he come to move so fast? He was getting better at the chase. He was learning.

But I was learning too. Wasn't I?

I turned a corner and faced an interminable hallway. It disappeared into nothingness, a long way away. Could I make it to the end before he caught me?

I pushed forward and felt my legs working to put distance between the shadow and me. Did I hear him calling me? How could he call me? I don't have a name. Or did I? I don't remember.

Things were always crazy in a dream.

Suddenly my legs struggled to move. As if I were waist deep in invisible quicksand. No matter how hard I tried, I could only step forward at the pace of a snail. The muscles in my thighs and calves hurt from the exertion.

The ice-cold breath was now on my neck. He was directly behind me, perhaps close enough to reach out and touch me.

No! I had to get away! I couldn't let Death touch me.

I sensed his hand, outstretched and ready to clasp my shoulder. The only thing I could do was fall forward, as if I'd just toppled like a stack of building blocks. But I didn't fall fast enough; it was more like I was floating! Then I felt the icy, stinging pressure of his fingers.

I screamed as I landed on the hallway's tiled floor ...

... and I woke up.

The disorientation lasted for a few seconds, as always.

That unpleasant ball of bees in my chest felt as if it might explode. Some might call it anxiety.

don't know what it was for me. Whatever I chose to call it, I didn't like it.

I immediately sat up in bed. The hotel room was dark. No, it was light outside. I had the curtains closed. The digital clock on the nightstand read 5:43. I'd meant to wake from the afternoon nap at 6:00. This had been happening a lot. My internal alarm clock was all messed up. At least I awoke early and not too late.

I had a job to do.

I stood and walked to the window. I carefully pulled back the drapes and peered outside. The Caribbean sun was bright and hot. I saw men and women in bathing attire. The resort's pool was full of guests, splashing and cavorting. I knew the beach would be crowded as well.

What would it be like to put on swim trunks, walk outside, and join the other people for fun at Ocho Rios, Jamaica! Didn't every human being want to lie on a recliner and relax with a piña colada while the sun baked your skin and turned it into cancer cells? Attend the nightly dance and hook up with someone of the opposite sex? Enjoy a weekend fling in paradise?

What a stupid idea. I knew I wasn't capable of that.

I released the drapes and plunged the room into darkness again.

I noticed that my hand was trembling. This always happened when I woke up. After so many hours without a pill I got the shakes. Naked, I walked into the bathroom and turned on the light. I reached for the plastic bottle I kept in a pouch. I'd tossed it onto the counter after I'd checked in at the resort. I tapped out a pill into the palm of my hand and popped it into my mouth. Then I turned on the faucet, cupped my hands, and filled them with enough water to chug down the medication.

My reflection in the mirror stared back at me. I was certainly no longer thirteen years old. I wasn't sure how old I was, although I was "created" in 1964. That was the downside of being a test tube baby.

I snapped the lid back on the pill bottle. There was no label. I'd obtained the oxycodone illegally, so there was no prescription information. Besides, no doctor in his right mind would have prescribed these powerful painkillers for as long as I'd been taking them.

I supposed people would say I was addicted, but actually I could quit anytime I wanted. I just didn't want to. I was pretty sure that, because of how I'm wired, the oxycodone didn't affect me like it would a "normal" person. I started taking the pills after the injury. I really needed painkillers at the time. But even after I'd healed, I found I liked the effects. The pills didn't dope me up the way they would most people. Instead, they cleared my head and calmed me down.

Granted, if I didn't take one after so many hours, I got a headache that was unbearable, I became anxious and jittery, and I had vivid nightmares. I never used to experience anxiety. Never. Now I did if I didn't take the pill. Did that mean I was addicted? In my own way, perhaps.

I returned to the room. I had a boat to catch. I had a target to eliminate. I had a job to do. Time to get dressed.

I knew I wasn't operating at 100 percent. I wasn't at the top of my game. Ever since the accident. Ever since Diana ... It wasn't good for me to think about it, but sometimes I couldn't help it.

The difficulty was avoiding the Agency. They'd been trying to reach me. Messages had come through the usual channels. I didn't answer them. I had no desire to work with ICA anymore. I was past my prime. I wasn't the assassin I once was. I knew that. It's why I worked freelance now. I supported myself with easy assignments like the one tonight.

Hector Corado. Mediocre scum who specialized in human trafficking. And my employer, Rogan, was just as sleazy. But it was a job. And it was money. Not as much as I made with the Agency, but

it was enough. I really didn't care about the money. As long as I had the means to carry on each day and dress the way I liked, I was happy.

Happy. What a concept.

If I could laugh, I would have.

The festivities were palpable on the beach of the Sandals Grande Ocho Rios Resort. Swimsuit-clad men and women ran in and out of the warm blue-green water, others played volleyball on the sand, and the rest reclined with drinks in hand as the sun slowly descended to the horizon. It was the magical hour of the day in Jamaica, the twilight time when the sky was painted orange-red, before it turned coal black and was dotted with the twinkling stars.

Agent 47 ignored it all as he made his way to the dock to board a small ferry that would carry select VIPs to Fernandez's yacht. Dressed in a black suit made of the highest-quality light wool, a white cotton shirt, black leather gloves, and the added accessory of a crimson red tie, 47 knew that he looked exceptionally sharp. The assassin took great pleasure in what he wore. After all, there were so few things in the world he did enjoy. With his tall stature, sleek bald head, and an enigmatic bar-code tattoo on the back of his neck, 47 was indeed a striking figure. His appearance was appropriate for the occasion, since the party aboard Fernandez's yacht was by invitation only. The island's rich, famous, and infamous were to be the exclusive guests. 47's employer, a man he knew only as Roget, had secured an invite for 47 under the name "Michael Brant." His cover was simple—he was a European of undeterminable origin who had made a fortune in water. It was a subject 47 didn't have to know much about—water was water, and it was easily bottled and sold. He would have no trouble fooling Emilio Fernandez, the playboy billionaire who owned the yacht. Fernandez, who made his money through dubious means, normally resided in Nassau but spent most of his time on the boat, traveling from island to island and throwing extravagant parties.

47 didn't care about Fernandez or the party. His only interest was Hector Corado. The intelligence assured him that the criminal would be aboard as Fernandez's special guest.

It was a good thing 47's employer had warned him that guests would be frisked and would have to pass through a metal detector at the dock before boarding the barge. Thus, 47 had left any and all weapons behind. He was armed with only the clothes on his back and a thin line of carbon-fiberwire, which wouldn't be picked up by the metal detector or even a very intimate frisking. In many ways, the Fiberwire was 47's trademark weapon.

Approximately thirty people stood in the security line on the dock. Beefy guards armed with automatic pistols on their belts ushered the men and women onto the barge after clearance. Everyone was dressed to the nines. The men were handsome and exuded power and wealth; the women were beautiful and exhibited entitlement and wanton sexuality. The ferry had already made two round-trips to the yacht to deliver party guests. Nearly three hundred people were expected aboard the massive vessel. That was useful for 47. The more crowded the party was, the more likely his job would go unnoticed. More important, the barge would continue to make the return trip to shore every half hour for revelers who had reached their partying limit.

As the boat sailed slowly toward the yacht, 47 couldn't help but be impressed. He reckoned the *Daphne* was between three hundred seventy and four hundred feet long and its tonnage most likely around five thousand. He'd been told the *Daphne* traveled at nineteen knots per hour, which, given the size of the cruiser, was quite fast. Built and designed by Lürssen

Germany and outfitted by Blohm & Voss, the *Daphne* sported a large deck for parties, two swimming pools, and luxury cabins, which were usually off-limits to anyone but Fernandez and special overnight guests. There was also a helipad, and 47 could discern the outline of the Bell 206 sitting upon it.

Corado's helicopter.

The party was already going full swing by the time 47 stepped onto the *Daphne*'s deck, located forward, near the bow. A live band specializing in reggae and calypso tunes blasted Bob Marley hits and other familiar numbers as couples and non-couples alike covered the area designated as a dance floor. The liquor flowed freely from open bars located at stations around the deck. Guests also had no qualms about consuming drugs in front of anyone. Marijuana and cocaine were in plain sight. After all, this was a private party, with no chance of law enforcement showing up. None of this made any impact on 47. He had no interest in dancing or recreational drugs. He occasionally drank but never in excess. What captured his attention was the monumental layout of gourmet food—sauteéd ackee, seafood, and steak, steamed and sautéed vegetables of every color and type, a variety of salads, conch chowder, Jamaican jerk chicken, curry goat, fried plantain, and an abundance of tropical fruits. For dessert, guests could try other Caribbean delectables such as gizzada, grater cake, potato pudding, and banana fritters, along with the more traditional fare of chocolate cakes and fruit pies. 47 hadn't eaten dinner, so he allowed himself to blend with the crowd, fill a plate, and take advantage of the host's hospitality before he got down to the business at hand.

The hitman moved to a tall dining station, around which guests could stand and eat. From there he could survey the entire deck. Roget's intel was correct. Fernandez had employed several guards—all of whom were armed—and positioned them at key points on the ship. It was forbidden for guests to bring weapons aboard, but his own men? No problemo.

That was good. All was going according to plan.

47 scanned the crowd and didn't see Corado. But he spotted Emilio Fernandez, surrounded by young, gorgeous females, making his way through the throng and greeting familiar faces with handshakes and smiles. The man was about forty, resembled a friendlier version of Al Pacino in *Scarface*, and oozed smarminess. As the billionaire moved closer, 47 prepared himself for the cue to go "onstage."

"And hello to you, *señor*," Fernandez said to him.

"Good evening." 47 gave him a smile. He could play a part well if he had to. What was uncomfortable for 47 when he was *himself*, he was smoothly able to fake when on a mission. In many ways, it was something like a game to him. Could he pull off the deceit? That was the thrill.

"Emilio Fernandez. I don't believe we've met." The man held out a hand.

"Michael Brant." 47 shook his palm. The man's grip was somewhat clammy. Fernandez was obviously someone who got where he was through his money, not by any strength of *machismo*. Unlike Corado, wherever he might be.

"Oh, Mr. Brant. You're in ..." Fernandez snapped his fingers in succession, trying to remember what he'd heard about his guest.

"Water. I have a water company in Luxembourg."

"Right! How canny of you to invest in water. How long ago did you do it?"

“My family has been in water since before I was born. I inherited the business.”

“I see. Well, smart family! We all need water, don’t we? Welcome aboard, Mr. Brant.”

“*Gracias*. You have a lovely yacht, sir.”

“The *Daphne* is my pride and joy.” The man spotted someone he knew and waved. “I must move on. Please enjoy yourself, Mr. Brant. Many of the women aboard the yacht, I understand, are more than willing to make the acquaintance of a man such as yourself.” He winked lasciviously and walked away with his harem. One of the girls, a dark-skinned, lithe model type, gazed at 47 over her shoulder as they disappeared.

An invitation?

47 paid no attention. Now sated, it was time for the hunt.

He circled the deck and finally homed in on Corado. The man sat with a lovely young Hispanic woman at a table near the bulkhead entrance to the cabins and lower levels of the ship. Two burly bodyguards accompanied him; both men stood behind Corado, with their arms folded in front of their broad chests. Corado was a small man, probably in his late forties. Most likely had a Napoleon complex. He had a walrus mustache and slicked-back black hair with touches of gray. A big fat Cuban cigar dominated his mouth. All three men wore tailored suits. 47 wondered if Fernandez had allowed them to be armed. Surely a wretch like Corado would never go anywhere without firepower for protection.

Right. Time to set the plan in motion.

47 needed a weapon.

He turned away from Corado’s table and walked along the starboard side toward the stern where the helipad was located. As expected, one of Fernandez’s guards blocked his passage midway. 47 glanced behind him to make sure no one else was watching.

“Guests are not allowed aft, sir,” the man said.

The noise from the party was nearly deafening, even that far away from the band and the excitement. 47 put on his best act as a happy partygoer. “What did you say?”

The guard spoke louder. “Guests are not allowed aft.”

“Oh, I wanted to have a look at that marvelous helipad. Is that Emilio’s helicopter? I’m something of a chopper enthusiast. That’s a Bell 206, isn’t it? I thought those were used exclusively by the military and law-enforcement personnel.”

“I’m sorry, sir, you’ll need to go back to the deck.”

47 slipped his hand into his jacket pocket and grasped the Fiberwire. “Aw, man, you can’t let me see it?”

“No, sir, I’m sorry.”

The assassin jerked his head toward the helipad. “Then how come *those* people get to go back there?”

The guard turned to see what the bald man was talking about. 47 swiftly threw the Fiberwire around the man’s neck and tightened it with both hands. Since the device had small grips on each end, it didn’t take much strength for 47 to choke the man to death.

It took all of fifteen seconds. The guard slumped into 47’s arms. The hitman turned his head around again—all clear. Should he throw the man overboard? No, the body might be spotted as it floated away. A door leading to the hold was directly to his right, so 47 wrapped his arms around the corpse’s barrel chest and dragged it inside.

The place was a storeroom full of life jackets. Hopefully, 47 thought, no one would need

any and the guard wouldn't be discovered. He laid the body in the corner and covered it with several jackets, but only after he had taken the man's Glock 17. Not a bad weapon at all. 47 figured he could have done much worse. He checked the magazine, stuffed the gun into his waistband beneath the jacket, and, satisfied, left the room.

47 went back to the party and stood next to the bar closest to Corado's table. Most of the guests had to stand in line at the various bars to pick up drinks, but a designated waiter had been assigned to Corado. When he wasn't attending to the criminal, the servant stood at the bar with his eyes on the long, tanned legs of a tall blonde dancing nearby. But when Corado waved his hand, the waiter rushed to the table and took another order. The man then hurried back and barked the instructions to the busy bartender.

47 picked up a cocktail napkin and a pen from the bar and wrote a message in Spanish on it.

JUST LEARNED POLICE ARRIVING IN 10 MINUTES TO ARREST YOU! PLEASE LEAVE AS QUIETLY AS POSSIBLE, GET TO CUBAN AIRSPACE IN MINUTES, AND THEY WILL NEVER KNOW YOU WERE HERE. I AM SORRY, MY FRIEND. SEE YOU SOON. EMILIO.

When he was done, 47 put the pen down next to a circular drink platter and kept the napkin in his hand. The bartender placed a new napkin and one drink on the tray. "Here's the girl's," he said. The waiter ignored him, for he was once again gawking at the blonde's legs. The bartender quickly shook a martini, poured it, added an olive, and placed another napkin and the glass on the tray. "And here's the man's," he said. The busy bartender then turned away to serve other guests.

47 quickly picked up the martini glass, set his napkin with the note on top of the clean one, and replaced the drink.

The waiter finally turned away from the blonde, grabbed the tray without noticing the hitman's napkin, and hustled back to Corado's table. 47 watched as the man first served the girl's drink and then placed Corado's martini—with 47's napkin—on the table. Corado barely acknowledged the waiter.

47 moved to a different position, still in sight of his prey. The criminal took a sip of the drink ... and then saw the scribbling. He picked up the napkin, read the message, and gestured to one of the bodyguards. The armed man leaned over, scanned the note, and the two men conferred. Corado furrowed his brow. He said something to his girlfriend and stood. She made a face of protest, but he roughly grabbed her arm and pulled her up.

Agent 47 quickly headed back to the starboard side of the ship and made his way aft. The music was as loud as ever, which suited him fine. No one would hear what he was about to do.

He reached the helipad before Corado and his entourage did. 47 flattened himself against the bulkhead, the Glock in his hand. He didn't have to wait long.

Corado, the girl, and the two bodyguards appeared from the yacht's port side. They moved quickly and quietly, but Corado was obviously distressed, the girl angry. One of the bodyguards made for the pilot's side of the chopper. Corado had to pull on the girl as she struggled against him. She cursed at him in Spanish, and then Corado turned to slap her hard. That shut her up.

The bodyguard/pilot opened the door and started to climb in.

Now.

47 stepped into view, leveled the Glock in front of him, and shot the bodyguard in the pilot's seat through the open door. Before the victim could register that he was shot, 47 swung his arm over, trained the sight on the second bodyguard, and squeezed the trigger. The man jerked and crumpled to the deck. It took precisely 2.3 seconds to eliminate Colorado's protection.

47 was confident the gunshots and the girl's subsequent scream couldn't be heard on the other side of the ship.

Corado reached inside his jacket and fumbled for a pistol hidden there. Apparently he wasn't used to having to defend himself—he always had others nearby to do the job.

The hitman shot him with a double tap—one in the chest and one in the head.

Easy.

That left the girl, who was now hysterical. She started to run back to the port side, yelling bloody murder.

47 raised the gun again to eliminate her from the equation—but his hand unwillingly trembled. Nevertheless, he squeezed the trigger.

A miss! How could that happen?

By then the girl had disappeared behind the bulkhead, running along the port side toward the bow.

47 took off after her.

Even though she had long, muscular legs, 47 was taller, stronger, and was genetically engineered to be a superior athlete in every way. He caught her in six seconds, and they weren't halfway to the ship's midpoint.

The assassin picked her up by the waist, even with the Glock in his right hand. She continued to scream and struggle.

Only one thing to do.

Agent 47 lifted and threw the girl over the rail into the sea.

He paused for a moment to look aft and toward the bow. Luckily, a guard, some forty feet away, was facing forward and didn't witness the act.

47 tossed the Glock overboard and then calmly walked back to the helipad. He picked up the bodies and piled the dead men, one by one, into the helicopter. The corpses slumped to the floor and wouldn't be discovered immediately. Satisfied, the hitman circled around to the starboard side and returned to the party. He smoothly merged into a line dance in progress. 47 put on his best happy face, performed the step in rhythm, and got lost among the partygoers.

The job was a success; nevertheless, 47 was angry with himself. The trembling hand had nearly cost him the mission. Was it the painkillers? Of course it was. The hitman knew it was so, and yet he obstinately refused to acknowledge the message this portended. Instead, he reached into his jacket pocket, found the plastic bottle, opened it, threw a tablet into his mouth, and swallowed it without water.

Over the next half hour, he calmed down and continued to act as one of the privileged guests at an exclusive Caribbean party. 47 saw no indication that his handiwork had been discovered. No one had a reason to go aft. If Fernandez missed his friend, he would figure the criminal and his girlfriend had gone below to a cabin.

Eventually, the assassin boarded the barge with twenty other exhausted and very drunk

guests, and he sailed back to Ocho Rios and safety.

As big noisy parties went, 47 decided this one hadn't been too bad.

Another superyacht, coincidentally also built by Lürssen, slowly and aimlessly drifted the waters west of Spain. At three hundred sixty feet long, the *Jean Danjou II* was not unlike the luxury vessels owned by the many wealthy socialites in Spain or France. After all, the Costa del Sol, especially the port of Marbella, was one of the most exclusive sailing destinations for the rich and famous. Thus, multimillion-dollar pleasure boats were a dime a dozen. Many of them navigated through the Strait of Gibraltar from the Mediterranean, into the open Atlantic, and back. The *Jean Danjou II* was no exception. Law-enforcement agencies knew she docked in Marbella but was registered to a corporation based in Switzerland. The owner was allegedly a major player in OPEC. This, of course, was false. The Swiss company was in reality the front for yet another business based in Portugal. This organization, too, was simply a cog in a third layer of deception, but it had connections to a conglomerate of banks in the Cayman Islands. In short, no one had any idea who really owned the yacht.

But if Interpol or other legal watchdogs of the world had an opportunity to visit the interior of the *Jean Danjou II*, they would discover a beehive of ex-military personnel, some of the world's savviest IT and encryption specialists, and the core middle-management team of a shadowy, secret international network.

Since she never anchored in one place for very long, the yacht was the ideal vessel to house the cerebral cortex of the International Contract Agency. And while high-level government officials, such as the president of the United States, the prime ministers of the United Kingdom and of Russia, and the king of Saudi Arabia, were certainly aware that the Agency existed, and although elite inner circles of intelligence organizations such as the CIA and SIS had reason and the ability to contact the Agency's leaders, these entities denied any knowledge of such an immoral but sometimes useful society. The ICA's services were sought after by the bad and the good alike. And yet, if America or Great Britain or Russia or any other nation on earth desired to actually locate the Agency's physical headquarters or meet its administrators, they might as well look on the moon. It was inconceivable that the ICA was right there in plain sight, moving from port to port on the open sea.

The *Jean Danjou II* was the perfect home for a necessary evil.

The twenty-eight-year-old Asian woman known only as Jade rechecked the figures on her notepad, glanced back at the monitor on the workstation labeled "Caribbean" to note any changes in the data, made some calculations, and then stood. The command center was buzzing with activity and distractions, but the woman had no problem staying focused. She looked at her steel-and-white-gold Rolex and saw that she was due in the conference room in five minutes. Just enough time for a quick walk-through to make sure everything was running smoothly.

The center, situated deep in the *Jean Danjou II* on deck three, was the size of a baseball diamond. The walls were covered with electronic maps and large-screen HD computer monitors. More than a dozen workstations, dedicated to monitoring the Agency's activities in various territories around the globe, occupied the floor. Each one was manned by an analyst.

or manager. A tireless and dedicated staff ran the Agency's many concurrent active operations. And it was Jade's job to oversee the control center, as well as serve as personal assistant to one of ICA's top managers.

Jade's professional demeanor, dark leather business suit, patterned stockings, glasses, and the black hair done in a bun might have suggested that she was an executive secretary for a Fortune 500 company. But if one looked past her obvious beauty and noticed her many tattoos—mostly illustrative dragons—and the severe, no-nonsense soul behind her brown eyes, it was apparent that the woman was a formidable and dangerous person.

After making the rounds to each workstation and obtaining status updates from every worker, Jade glanced again at the Rolex. It was time for the meeting with her boss. She informed Julius, her immediate subordinate, where she was going, and then left the command center in his capable hands.

Any ship contained narrow and claustrophobic spaces, but the interior of the *Jean Danjou* felt more like a high-tech corporate building than a luxury yacht. Each manager, responsible for the various functions that kept the Agency in business, had his or her own private office. Jade knew that one day she would have one. With a promotion to manager, she would gain more responsibility. That meant more money. Working for the Agency was the best job in the world.

Ascending to deck two by a marble and steel staircase, Jade nodded at one of the armed guards who patrolled the ship at all times. She liked to give the guards the perception that she appreciated their protection, when, in fact, Jade could probably take on three of them at once, slit their throats with the stiletto she kept on her person at all times, and then calmly go about her business.

Eventually she reached the conference room and entered.

"Right on time, Jade. My God, you're damned efficient," said the man sitting at a long table in front of a computer monitor. He was finishing his lunch—a po'-boy stuffed with salami, cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, and peppers. "Tell me again where you had combat training?"

"Westerners call it the Golden Triangle," she answered. "Specifically Burma. But I spent a lot of time in Laos."

"Jungle stuff, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

Benjamin Travis allowed his eyes to look her up and down—it was something he did daily, but she didn't mind. All the men on the boat—and some women—thought she was hot. It had its advantages.

Travis said, "Sit down. What have you got for me?"

Jade took a seat and placed her notebook in front of her. "We have a new lead on Agent 47's whereabouts."

Travis raised his eyebrows. "And we've been hearing that every month for a year, Jade."

"This is different, sir. A reliable source informs us that 47 was spotted in Jamaica as recently as two days ago. In fact, the source is one of ours."

Travis swiveled his chair away from the computer. A man in his forties, he always dressed in a gray suit, white shirt, and an Agency tie. He was probably twenty-five pounds overweight; his gut drooped over his belt, and he tended to sweat more than other men. With

his thick red-brown mustache, glasses, and communications earpiece, he might have resembled a retired CIA operative who was past his prime. In reality, like Jade, Benjamin Travis was not someone to be underestimated. The epitome of a “company man,” Travis was known by his colleagues to have no tolerance for incompetence. Failure was severely punished. As one of the senior managers of the Agency, he was cunning, ruthless, and ambitious. He commanded teams of assassins that operated around the world. He spent just as much time in the control room as did his personal assistant, often doing her job.

It was no wonder that he had quickly risen in the ranks to become one of the Agency’s star players.

“Jamaica?” he echoed.

“Yes, sir.”

“You don’t say. How soon can you verify it?” he asked.

“I have Julius on it. This time it looks promising, Benjamin. Our man in Jamaica is usually reliable on intel but untrustworthy in financial matters.”

He merely nodded. Jade knew that Travis never jumped to conclusions before all the i’s were dotted and t’s crossed.

“What else?”

“That’s all, sir. Still no news on Burnwood. I’m afraid that trail has gone quite cold.”

Travis nodded again. “That figures. Thank you, Jade. Please keep me informed. The minute you have confirmation on 47, I want to know.”

“Yes, sir.” She stood and moved toward the door.

“Wait.”

Jade stopped and turned. “Yes?”

“Please inform the captain to point the ship toward the Caribbean. If what you say is true, I want to be close enough to intercept the guy.” He shrugged. “And if this lead of yours turns out to be another dead end, then we’ll stop in Cuba or the Bahamas or somewhere and have an island shore leave. We could use it.”

“Yes, sir.” She scribbled a note on her pad, pushed her glasses back to the bridge of her nose, and left the room.

Travis turned to the computer monitor and resumed studying the latest report from Chicago. The results had gone beyond expectations. He knew his pet project had the potential to help the Agency evolve into a force with which the entire world would have to reckon. The ICA would possess something that could very well bring governments to their knees.

It represented power. Unimaginable power.

In just a few more months, the project would be completed. As the experiment advanced, the potential was boundless.

Travis could smell the promotion he would receive. It was entirely possible he would be appointed to be the Agency’s chairman. And it could have occurred sooner, had Diana Burnwood not betrayed him. The bitch had threatened to make trouble for Travis’s project because of some kind of high-and-mighty conscience she suddenly developed. She was a dangerous loose cannon, and she had to be found. His biggest fear was that Agent 47 would beat him to it, make contact with Diana, and then the two would join forces *against* the Agency. Travis didn’t put it past Diana to turn the ICA’s most valuable asset.

Travis picked up Agent 47's dossier and scanned it again. He knew everything about the assassin, but the manager had never met him. The hitman's exploits were legendary, though Travis looked forward to the day when he could shake 47's hand and welcome him back to the team. If they could find him. If he would come willingly.

An interesting case, Agent 47. The world's greatest assassin was "created" in a Romanian mental asylum as a clone from the DNA of Dr. Otto Ort-Meyer and four other men. Born on September 5, 1964, Agent 47 was tagged with the identity 640509-040147 by a tattoo on the back of his neck and raised with other "Series IV" clones by the asylum's staff. Along with the other clones, 47 was trained from youth to kill efficiently. Instructed in the use of firearms, military hardware, and more-classic tools of assassination, the clone could wield virtually any weapon with ease.

After thirty years of relentless training, 47 allegedly killed a security guard and escaped from the asylum grounds. Some said that he didn't escape but rather perhaps was allowed to leave, unleashing the world's greatest assassin.

The rest, as they say, was history. At least the parts that were known.

As far as the hitman's personality went, there wasn't much documented. Agent 47 had expensive tastes in clothing, food, and drink, but otherwise he had little interest in material possessions. He took great pride in his personal arsenal: a briefcase containing two customized AMT Hardballers. The assassin said very little, but when he did, he usually spoke in a blunt, informal, and emotionless manner. He wasn't known to have an interest in sex. And while Agent 47 was extremely reliable and a perfectionist in what he did for a living, the man trusted no one. Except, possibly, Diana Burnwood.

Travis wondered if that conviction was still strong, given what had happened to 47 in the Himalayas.

Spotted in Jamaica, was he? Maybe it was true. Did Agent 47 know where Diana was hiding? Had they been in touch? After all, the hitman and his handler had a unique and special relationship. If anyone could get close—personally—to Agent 47, it was Diana.

But the woman hadn't been seen or heard from for a year. Neither had Agent 47, for that matter. He had gone off the grid after their last assignment together. At first the Agency thought the assassin was dead, but 47 unwittingly left bread crumbs indicating he'd survived the disaster in Nepal. The Agency spent months tracking him, but 47 was clever and elusive. He didn't want to be found.

Which was why Travis worried that the hitman and Diana were in cahoots. That could be a deadly combination—for *him*.

He clenched his fists and banged them hard on the table. Jade had to be right about the lead. If the Agency could get its hands on Agent 47 and recruit him back into the organization, Travis had a chance to fulfill his ambition, finish his pet project, and turn 47 against the one person in the world the assassin trusted.

Helen McAdams shut down her computer and put away the news clippings in one of the many folders marked “Media Publicity.” Her boss wanted everything that was written about him documented and archived. Another assistant, George, duped television appearances. Yet another one scoured the Internet and saved bloggers’ and message-board comments—good or bad. Charlie Wilkins, leader of the Church of Will, was a man who documented his life on a daily basis. In the future, he liked to say, someone would have all the material needed for a complete and accurate biography.

Work was finished for the day. Helen gathered her belongings, shut off the lights in her mansion office, stepped out, and locked the door. She had enough time to run to her apartment and whip up some supper before heading to the recruitment center to interview new Church members. While she was paid for her job as one of several personal assistants to Reverend Wilkins, Helen kept busy with other volunteer assignments at Greenhill. For her, recruiting was the most interesting one, for she was able to meet new people. There was always the chance that a suitable man might walk in and join the Church of Will, someone with whom she could become friendly—and perhaps more.

It was good to keep busy. Helen had never liked to be idle—the “devil’s workshop” and all that—but the need to keep her mind occupied was essential ever since the stint in the hospital. It was part of the recovery process. Staying on top of numerous tasks also kept her from dwelling on her situation. Helen rarely admitted to herself that she was lonely, but it was always the elephant in the room. After her parents were killed in a tragic highway accident, and her sister had succumbed to ovarian cancer, Helen sometimes feared she was alone in the world. That wasn’t really true, she had the Church and the friends she had made there. And Charlie, of course. Reverend Charlie Wilkins. He was the light and the hope and the inspiration that kept her going. If she hadn’t found the Church of Will ... Well, she didn’t like to think of how she might have ended up.

Before she could go home, there was one other task to do. Helen walked past the other assistants’ offices and down the long hall to Wilkins’s private sanctuary, where the man worked and prayed. His office door was closed and locked, but she had a key. It made her feel special that she was the only one of his personal assistants whom he trusted with a key to his office. Since he was away on business, one of Helen’s duties was to water the many plants he kept inside. She was happy to do so. She felt his presence in the place, and it made her feel good.

Charlie Wilkins’s office was a copy of the White House Oval Office in design, but the reverend had decorated it quite differently. For one thing, a wall-sized, curved plate-glass window faced Aquia Lake. The mansion had been erected on the northern shore, for Wilkins loved the view of the water. He claimed it helped him meditate. The moon and stars reflected off its surface at night, which was why he always made it a point to pray in his office at exactly midnight whenever he was on the premises. Helen agreed it was a beautiful pastoral setting. The Church of Will compound couldn’t have been built on a lovelier spot in Virginia. That was why it was called Greenhill.

Other differences from the Oval Office included the abundance of greenery. Wilkins had

green thumb and believed that all plants had souls. There were more than a hundred potted plants in the office, and Helen took the time to water the appropriate ones. They had different schedules—some had to be watered daily, others only once a week or less.

Then there were the many religious artifacts and artworks in the space. In fact, they were displayed all over the mansion. An identical room directly below this one, in the basement, supposedly stored hundreds of such treasures, but Helen had never been in it. It was off-limits to everyone except select personnel.

Wilkins embraced all of the world's religions. The Church of Will laid no claim on any particular one. Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and even Scientologists—everyone was welcome in the Church of Will. Wilkins had cannily taken aspects from each faith and combined them to create his own. And it worked.

The Church of Will had branches all over America. It had spread like wildfire over a few short decades. And with Charlie Wilkins's charismatic charm, his showbusiness acumen, and his good looks, he had conquered a sizable percentage of the American population. Some said he should run for president, but Wilkins was happy to let Senator Dana Linder do so. After all, she was a member of the Church. Wilkins did his part to campaign for her and was one of her biggest contributors.

Helen was convinced that the country needed the influence of the Church of Will's doctrines. The past decade had been hard on America. The high rise of unemployment to 20 percent, the unacceptable gasoline prices, the failing of much of the states' infrastructure, and the general dissatisfaction among the people had contributed to the worst depression since the great one of the 1930s. It was no wonder that various militant groups had sprung up all over the nation. Masked, armed militias periodically conducted terrorist attacks on federal and governmental properties. So far, there hadn't been many lives lost—only man-made structures—but the situation was becoming worse. The media usually focused on the New Model Army. Secretive and deadly, the NMA seemed to have the means and ability to strike anywhere at any time. Led by the mysterious outlaw known as "Cromwell," the New Model Army was wanted by the FBI and the police in every state, but on the other hand they had a Robin Hood mystique that ordinary citizens embraced. Helen was certain the American public was protecting the NMA by helping to hide and transport its members from place to place.

When she was done watering the plants, Helen pushed aside the thoughts about the state of the union. It was 5:45. She needed to hurry to her apartment so she could catch Wilkins's television program. She never missed it if she could help it. Helen locked his office door, scampered down the long hallway, and entered the mansion's main rotunda. She said good night to the two security men stationed there and left through the front door.

The mansion was a small palace, separated from the rest of Greenhill by a tall, electrified wire fence. Wilkins was such a celebrity that he needed protection. While most Church members were trustworthy and worshipped the man, there had been a couple of instances in which mentally unbalanced persons had tried to get into the mansion to cause the reverend some harm. Hence, the electric fence, security teams, and extra precautions had been installed. There were also a few other buildings on the inside of the fence—a barn, which was both a storage facility and a garage for Wilkins's personal limousine, and a guardhouse.

The gate was unmanned. Anyone who wanted to open it had to have a keycard, which was issued to only a few select staff members. Helen slipped hers through the magnetic slot, and

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