

CHAPTER 1

Studying her reflection in the knife with which she would kill the approaching jogger, the assassin checked the integrity of her lipstick. The knife's surface was dappled with raindrops, but she could still see her lips. The color was not too obvious, slightly understated. Although she didn't want to draw any undue attention to herself in her disguise, she did want to look good. One had to maintain certain standards.

Thunder crashed against the walls of the tiny doorway in which she stood and she held the knife out past the opening. Using the reflection, she watched the jogger approach on the outdoor track that surrounded the glass roof of the shopping mall. For days she had planned this kill, watching the insufferable weather channel for the perfect day when this thunderstorm would move across Dallas. No sane person would be caught jogging around an exposed track six stories above the ground with lightning splattering all around downtown Dallas. The jogger was not sane. Therefore, the jogger deserved to die for interrupting her carefully laid plans.

She drew in a deep breath, calming her nerves and readying herself for the killing blow. One quick stab at the base of the back of the skull, the point pushed up through the foramen magnum to sever the brainstem. The jogger would never know what hit him. Just like pithing frogs back home on the bayou.

She drew the knife back, closing her eyes to listen to the approaching footfalls, the emergence of the labored breathing, the odor of sweat. She opened her eyes, muscles coiled just as the jogger passed the threshold of the doorway. But, the jogger never turned her way, oblivious to her presence. At the last microsecond, she held back the fatal blow and watched the jogger recede into the rain-misted distance. It would take him at least ten minutes to make the return lap to her position. She had time and had avoided an unnecessary complication.

Gathering her oiled gunny sack and hoisting it over her maintenance overalls, the assassin glanced out over the jogging track and saw the jogger disappear around the far turn in the jogging path that encircled the raised, pyramid shaped glass ceiling over the shopping mall atrium. Walking calmly as any maintenance worker would, she stepped across the track and made her way toward a maintenance entrance.

Through the rain stained glass she watched children skating on the ice rink six floors below her, the open atrium of the huge shopping mall stretching uninterrupted to the level of the roof. She glanced behind her once to make sure the roof entrance and its small protective housing did not harbor an unexpected visitor.

With gloved hands, she slid a metal pick into the lock of the maintenance door, shaking her head to rid herself of the pelting rain. Even though it was the middle of July, the water was cold and it sent a chill down her spine. The lock clicked and she opened the door and stepped into a small, metal enclosure. Ahead of her, catwalks branched out across the underside of the mall roof, allowing maintenance workers to reach light fixtures and retrieve balloons lost by the children milling below. For a moment, she saw a teenage girl in a pink dress, blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail blowing out the candles on a cake. A cake shaped like a lamb. She saw the girl smile as her mother cut into the cake. She heard the girl scream at the sight of the severed leg of the cake. The assassin closed her eyes, meditating to push the disturbing image away, burying it deep within her memory where it would not interfere with her job.

The assassin shook water from her maintenance uniform and from the gunnysack. Quietly she made her way down the catwalk and took a left at the first branch. From the cavernous space beneath her, the sounds of laughter and music engulfed her. She tuned the sounds out, focusing on the calm rhythm of her heart, the steady flow of air in and out of her lungs.

Reaching the end of the catwalk, she stepped out onto an overhang enclosed with wire mesh and knelt to the corrugated metal floor. Moving deftly, she slid the rifle from the gunnysack, attaching the wooden stock to the barrel in quick, fluid movements. For a moment, she studied the engravings on the stock, the memories of past kills. Each had been successful. The rifle had never let her down.

Placing the gunnysack on a hook at the edge of the wire cage where she could quickly grab it for a getaway, she laid down on the floor of the cage, bracing her elbows in the corners and sliding the thin barrel through the crisscrossing wire. She didn't have to look to know her victim waited for his bullet. He had come to the same table on the balcony of the third floor overlooking the ice rink every day for the past five years. He

had missed lunch only once when his mother had died. He had even scheduled his mother's funeral so that he would make his lunch date on the day of the funeral.

The Chinese restaurant had an interior dining area off the walkway of the third floor of the mall. Across the walkway, twelve tables were nestled onto an overhanging balcony for shoppers to take in even more of the heady shopping atmosphere of one of the largest malls in Texas. The table closest to the edge carried a reserved sign each day until exactly twelve noon. At that moment, the man would arrive, taking his chair opposite a supporting beam for the walkway of the floor above. The only clear shot would have to be from above and the assassin had worked for days to find the perfect vantage point. If the man sat across from his usual chair, he would be protected by the beam. But, he was too much of a creature of habit to make the mistake that would save his life.

The assassin felt tranquility flow over her, filling her with tightly coiled power ready to be unleashed in the moment of the bullet impact. She rested her cheek against the gun, feeling the cool caress of her dear friend and looked through the gun sight. The man was in place, sitting in his usual chair already sipping his hot, green tea. She noticed the movement of a shadow and lifted the gun's barrel ever so slightly. A teenage boy sat at the far end of the table, his reddish blonde hair cut closely to his skull. He wore a beige tee shirt and played with his lower lip. His eyes were directed at her. But, she did not worry. He could not see her through the crisscross wires.

Another shadow fell over the table. Someone sat behind the supporting beam, out of sight. She saw strong, lean arms laid out on the table. And then, the man sat forward, his face coming fully into view, his piercing turquoise eyes gleaming even from this distance.

For the first time in five years, the assassin's heart rate accelerated and she panicked. Every muscle in her body contracted at the sight of that man and without realizing it she pulled the trigger. The explosion echoed through the shopping mall, the ice skaters screaming beneath her. But, she did not hear them or notice where the bullet impacted. For the first time in a five years, she felt fear. She bolted up from the floor, the rifle barrel snaring in the wires. She jerked at it and it flew backward, out of her grasp to skitter across the catwalk and fall toward the ice below. She did not care. She had to run.

She had to escape. Grabbing the gunnysack, she hurtled down the catwalk toward the maintenance door, all obligation to her employer forgotten, all reason gone, only fear of the man with the turquoise eyes who she thought had been dead. Instead, he was alive and her life would never be the same again.