

Trampling On the Blood of My Enemies

PART 1—Will

The room was filled with dead bodies—severed limbs, severed heads, and the distributed contents of what had once been held in people’s chests and stomachs and bowels.

It had been a wedding reception, but then something big and fast and powerful had moved through the space, literally ripping everyone apart.

“Same as the last place,” Will muttered into the microphone. He was glad the air he was breathing came from a reservoir in his suit, and not from the room.

“Full auto,” he added, moving his own fire selection switch to the automatic position. Anyone capable of doing this much damage would definitely be hard to stop—if they were still here.

The building’s emergency lighting had kicked in when the main power failed and directional spotlights dotted around the walls, near the ceiling, illuminated the garish carnage at a glancing angle, so that even the shadows looked like something from Dante’s *Inferno*. They spread across the wet floor and up onto the blood-spattered walls. But nothing here was moving.

A shattered door at the opposite end of the room was hanging by a single hinge. Will didn’t hear sounds of movement, or anything else. He increased the directional audio sensor gain until he could hear the wind blowing from outside through the building, and even the breathing of the team, still in the entrance hallway behind him. No footsteps. No crashing sounds from deeper within the building. It was possible that whoever, or whatever, did this was still hiding inside—he or she or . . . *it*—possible, but unlikely. The killer was gone. Just like at the previous crime scene.

He moved sideways, and away from the entrance, to make way his across the room, stepping along the perimeter near the wall. He signaled for his team to do the

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same thing, pointing left and right. That would have them avoid the main area of the slippery mess on the floor, minimizing the damage to forensic evidence. Despite this risk to the evidence, it was important that he made sure the building was safe before allowing the others inside. Sifting through the crime scene would be a matter for the police and forensic scientists, not his tactical team.

At the other side of the main room, he paused to take a quick glance through the doorway, retracting his head quickly in case the killer was still lying in wait beyond the opening. A subtle movement of his jaw changed the way everything looked on the heads-up display, as he switched from the visible spectrum camera to a mid-infrared sensor. Now warm things appeared bright and cold objects dark. He looked through the doorway again and saw what looked like oversized human-like footprints—still warm from places where blood had clung to the bottom of the killer's feet. The tracks led away from where he was, disappearing down a hallway on the other side of this second room.

Will raised a fist, signaling for his team to hold while he moved diagonally through the doorway, so someone could cover him. He moved his jaw again and the room turned a bright green, as the visible camera with an image intensifier kicked in. There was nothing to see.

At the end of the next short hallway was another opening. Its door, too, had been ripped from the hinges. Beyond that doorway, was the parking lot.

"Anything out back?" he said into the microphone. Part of his team had circled around the outside of the building and the three members should be able to see the whole parking area.

"Nothing. There are some odd footprints leading onto the grass on the other side of the cars. They seem to disappear into the river. And then there's a big field of tall grass on the other side of the water."

"Shit! Get in the chopper and see if you can find anything moving from up in the air. We'll cross the channel here and look for signs of the killer on the opposite bank."

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Will changed the communications channel to a civilian police frequency. “The building’s clear. See if there are any survivors. We’ll try to track down whoever did this.”

Back on the team frequency, Will told the men in the building to follow him. He made his way out the back doorway, past the parking lot, and across the lawn to the river—again staying clear of those places where the grass had been disturbed.

The five members of the team spread out along the riverbank on either side of where the prints disappeared into the water and slowly entered the channel. It wasn’t deep, maybe mid thigh, and with a gentle current.

“Anything?” Will asked, when the chopper passed over his head.

“Nothing moving, upstream or down. I’m scanning the opposite bank for disturbance.” After a pause: “It looks as though a lot of things, probably animals, have been moving over there, but I do see what looks like a set of fresh tracks on LADAR, just across from where you are.”

When Will reached the opposite bank, he used the intensified camera again, to find the tracks. The grass was compacted by a fresh set of prints. They resembled the footprints of a huge person moving, close together as though the killer had started walking, but then the spacing between steps increased, as he started to run. They followed the trail, noting that the spacing between steps kept getting larger—much farther apart and they looked as though they had changed—the person seemed to be getting heavier, and larger, too.

“No one can run that fast,” someone muttered. The distance between prints was unbelievable at this point.

The team continued to follow the tracks for another two hundred meters when it became clear the impressions were changing again, fading, as though the person running was getting lighter with each step. Then they disappeared altogether.

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“How is *that* possible?” Will asked, looking up into the sky. The last dim glow of light was just fading in the west. It would be a long night. “Flight,” he said. “He might have had some kind of aircraft. Point your RADAR up, too.”

“Lots of clutter up there. Commercial traffic.”

“Did he sprout wings and fly away?” Mark asked.

“Give me a break. He probably had an ultra light over here, waiting for his getaway.”

“I didn’t see anything that looked like he paused to pick up an airframe.”

“But it’s more plausible than someone sprouting wings,” Will said.

“Hmm.” That was Ken—the team’s sniper, looking through his rifle scope where he could see into the distance.

“Anything out there, Ken?” Will asked.

“No. Nothing.”

“Flight?”

“Nothing, no movement, no tracks. Nothing on the optical bands and nothing on RADAR.”

“He can’t just have vanished,” Will said.

“Maybe not, but it sure looks that way.”

Will sighed. They were too late. “Take up a position here until we can get more people on site.” Whatever they were chasing had gotten away. Of course he, or it, might still be out there—somewhere among the tall grass, hiding, or even lying in wait. But nothing was showing up on the heat bands, either. Still, Will wasn’t going to risk his team spreading out for a greater area search. Not with the kind of threat that could do what they’d seen in the building. Body armor was good at stopping blades and maybe small caliber projectiles at close range, but not something that could rip them in half.

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“Flight,” he said. “Launch the drones. Record anything that looks suspicious—even animals.”

“10-4,” came the reply. The team on the ground arranged itself into a defensive V formation to wait for reinforcements, and for daylight.

This was the second bloodbath they’d seen in a month, and it looked almost identical to what happened at the first site. In front of the building, at the entrance, a bright red carpet had been rolled out from the main door to the curb—just like the last time. It was wet, squishy, and no doubt saturated with blood this time, too. The same message was scrawled on the wall outside the front door, in blood, too. It said:

Trampling on the blood of my enemies.

About an hour before Will and his team entered the building, their team had received an anonymous text message, giving the location of the building along with another message:

The friends of my enemy are my enemies.

People will fall every month, until he surrenders.

The building was a reception hall that could be rented for special events, and it was located at the edge of a perimeter town just north of Boston. Their team had been invited to see the location of the first incident last month. Will knew that investigators were still combing through the evidence from that first violent scene—a retirement party. He hoped that someone, somewhere, would be able to piece together a lead. They needed to find out who was doing this, or at least a link to someone who might know something. It didn’t seem possible that just one human could do so much damage without some kind of weapon.

And who was ‘he’—the one who must surrender?

Was this some new kind of mob hit?

Was the killer in an exo-suit of some kind, a machine that enhanced strength, and could maybe fly?

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And why was he or she doing this?

Will didn't have answers to any of these questions—certainly not the why. But then, it didn't really matter why. Why was for the investigators and the courts to figure out. Will's job was to stop the killing. Just then he received a text message on his display.

"Guys," he said. "They found a survivor."

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PART 2—John

Someone had noticed him—someone marked and monitored by the enemy. People always noticed eventually. Maybe it was just some random person, here in town—an unlucky soul who'd done something really bad in their life, who had drawn the attention of the enemy. Whoever it was must have realized there was something strange about him. No. Strange wasn't the right word, not really. Unnatural. Yeah. That was closer to the mark.

His apartment was small—a bit more than an efficiency, but no spare room, and the bedroom he used was just big enough for the bed and a chest of drawers. The kitchen-dining room-sitting area was small, too, a single space. Two windows overlooked the street below.

John stared bleakly out of a window from his apartment, half expecting to see something across the street, watching him, someone or some thing. The aroma from the pizza store downstairs drifted up through the open window, taking him back to one of his past lives, yet again. For John, these memories were indistinguishable from real life. And if he wasn't careful, John could lose himself in the past—it had happened for days at a time. Right now he was remembering angry villagers. Where was that? And when? It really didn't matter. The past wasn't so important today.

Right now something was killing people in the greater Boston area, and trying to draw him out. He couldn't be sure which form the creature had taken. There was almost no information being released by the police, and he'd been reluctant to check out the site for himself. Creatures like this always left a trace, a lingering sense of presence—for those who could perceive it. From the limited descriptions he'd read—descriptions of extreme carnage—John suspected he knew what form the creature had taken: a soldier, a fanatic in the service of the enemy. It wouldn't stop killing anytime soon.

Two months ago John had spoken with someone who knew him—a man from that island of arrogant fools. Although the man was not marked, the meeting

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made him nervous. After all, he was so careful—new names, new jobs, and tight backstories. He'd managed to live here in the Boston area for more than eighty years now. It had been a long time since John lived anywhere for more than thirty or forty years, at most. The island man said he wouldn't share John's true identity with anyone, not even with his own people. But had he kept his word?

It was time to move on—to really move on, as he'd done so many times in the past. More times than he could remember. If the enemy had found out precisely where John was living—despite his ability to hide his presence—then the creature would already be here.

The real question was: what obligation did John have to stop the carnage before leaving? Because if he just left, the killing would go on for a long while. At least until the creature realized John was out of reach. The enemy—the real enemy, not just this soldier—didn't like risking exposure with nothing to gain, so it *would* end.

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PART 3—Sandra

Sandra Johnson wiped her face with one hand and then ran the fingers of both hands through her hair. Three days now—it had been three days since she'd slept in a real bed, and the few hours of sleep she managed were gained either in a chair or on the sofa in her office.

The survivor of the 'Wedding Massacre', as it was being called by the press, were actually two survivors—children. A boy, just six years old, and a ten-year-old girl, who instantly assumed the role of the boy's protector. Thus far neither had been able to tell the police anything useful. They clung to each other as though afraid the nightmare would return if they were separated. The boy refused to speak at all, simply staring at whoever spoke to him with a wide-eyed haunted look. The girl insisted that she didn't know what happened and glared fiercely at anyone who tried to separate them for questioning. She said there had been a lot of screaming and one overwhelmingly deep voice that didn't even sound human. Whatever did the killing had murdered a whole room full of people. The word 'murder' always ignited a black pit in Sandra's stomach. She took a breath and let it out, trying to push that disturbing thought to the back of her mind.

Her team of investigators met twice per day to go over what they'd learned. At six in the morning and every afternoon at five p.m. to go over anything the investigators had learned. They used a conference room without windows and with just one door. Everyone was forced to leave his or her cell phone outside the office area. There would be no leaks from this investigation.

"What did we get from the security cameras?"

"Nothing. The cameras all shut down when the power went off. That was at eighteen forty three, just a little after sundown."

"Didn't they have backup power?"

"Yeah, but the backup failed."

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“That’s weird. What would explain it?”

“The techies are speculating that a strong electromagnetic pulse—an EMP—might have knocked everything out. Eventually, the backup power could have kicked back in, unless the circuits were damaged.”

“Did the cameras kick back in?”

“No. There was video stored in the cloud right up to the time of the power outage, but then nothing. The cameras never came back online, although the emergency lighting did.”

“What does the video we do have show? Anything unusual?”

“No, just a normal wedding reception. People had just sat down for dinner and then the feed suddenly stops.”

“How about the phones? Someone must have been taking a video.”

“The phones are all blank. All the data was erased from every cell phone.”

Sandra turned to a man on her right—the team’s psychiatrist. “Where were the kids when this happened? Have you managed to get anything more out of them?”

“They had their own table in the corner, near the cloakroom. That’s where they went when the screaming started—the girl dragged the boy into the closet and then covered both of them with coats. We don’t know if the killer was even aware that they were there.”

Next she turned back to the forensics team lead. “Have you put a timeline together—a sequence of events?”

“It’s difficult. We’re still trying to separate all of the blood and tissue samples to identify individuals. The furniture—tables and folding chairs, mostly—were almost as damaged as the bodies. I think it’s reasonable to assume that whatever did this simply began with those nearest to the front door and worked its way through the room, making sure no one got past.”

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“It? Have we given up on a human perpetrator?”

“No, ma’am. Not completely. But it’s hard to imagine how a human could have done this—an animal, maybe—but a human would have to have the strength of ten or twenty people, at least, to do the kind of damage we saw.”

“What about a gang?”

“There was just one set of footprints leaving the building. They weren’t very clear, but looked humanoid—large and a bit oddly shaped but not like an animal.”

“Let’s not speculate too much. Okay?” The members of the team looked down, some shaking their heads. “Let’s see if we can find any blood not related to the people killed in the room and test it before we start discussing animals . . . or monsters.”

“We didn’t find anything at the first site. Nothing. No trace, other than the victims.”

“There’s got to be *something*. Everything living leaves DNA.”

“There’ll be lots of DNA in the room. Not only the people killed at the reception, but traces from the other people who rented the facility before. Unless we can find traces among the fresh tissue samples that don’t belong to anyone in the room, I doubt the DNA testing will be conclusive. Certainly nothing that would hold up in court.”

Sandra snorted. “Court? I don’t care about court. I just want to stop the killing. What about the writing outside the building—were there any fingerprints in the blood?”

“None. We’ve examined the doors for prints, too, but whoever did this didn’t bother with things like doorknobs. They just crashed through.”

Sandra let out a sigh. “Does anyone have *anything*? Come on, folks, these victims are counting on us.”

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“I’d say the best chance we have are the tissue samples. The problem is that the room is like a big DNA soup—everyone’s tissues are all mixed together. Sorting the individuals out, so we can identify any unknown samples, will take another twenty-four hours—at the very least.”

“Keep the team working overnight and give me a progress update at o-six-hundred tomorrow.”

Sandra returned to her small office, pausing briefly to look at the sofa. This crime scene was beginning to look just like the retirement party. Another blank. Who or what the hell did this? And Why? She had to give her boss an update tomorrow morning at eight, and she was dreading that meeting. They had nothing to show from either site. She looked at her calendar and saw a meeting scheduled with the leader of the tactical team. Will . . . what was his name? Takahashi. That’s right. He’d be in later tonight. She sighed again, thinking that she’d probably be living in this office and eating takeout for a good while yet.

What they needed to find out was whom the murderer was targeting. The note from him—and she assumed it was a man—referred to someone: ‘More will fall, until *he* surrenders.’ This individual was the key to stopping the killings. She already had a team tracking down contacts made by people known to be at each of the two crime scenes—looking for overlap. But that was a tall order. It was time to look for video from cameras all over the state, tracing the movements of the many people who were in the rooms. That work would grow into a big project, very fast. Thankfully, and thus far, she’d gotten all the resources and cooperation she requested. But Sandra knew that she had better start showing progress soon, or she’d be replaced.

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PART 4—John

John watched the daily meeting, already in progress when he entered the room. No one noticed him, of course. His corporeal body was elsewhere—in a safe place. Leaving his body was something he'd learned to maintain his sanity. When you've been buried alive for a time—under tons of rock and unable to move at all—you need to be able to free your mind from your body's condition. That's when he discovered he could do what he called 'travelling'. It was a convenience now, and it allowed him the freedom to go where he liked without being seen. John wasn't sure how he was able to see and hear without sensory organs, but that was far less strange than the many other things he'd been through.

The police didn't have any real clues. Some of them thought that whatever was killing the people wasn't human. Sandra, the team's lead investigator, was deliberately pushing this idea away. She was afraid of what her superiors would say and do.

John examined the list of people tacked up on the wall from the two killings. He didn't recognize anyone from the wedding reception, but one name from the retirement party stood out. The man had been a colleague of his, some time back—a period when he'd allowed himself the luxury of a challenging job. Normally, John took simpler jobs, ones that would not draw attention to him, and where his 'durability' and 'strength' wouldn't accidentally be on display. Restaurant work, or late-night jobs where he worked alone were safest, although John preferred to be around other people. Bob and he had worked as engineers almost thirty years ago. It was possible that he'd seen John on the street—that was the risk he took staying in the same city for so long. People aged. John didn't.

He'd tried cosmetic surgery, to change his face more than he could by using makeup and prosthetic devices, but his own features always re-emerged after a few months. The best John could manage were superficial modifications, and wardrobe changes—disguises really. An old expression from the Indian philosopher came to mind: 'Life maintains form', or something like that. John could not radically change

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himself no matter what he did. Whatever he cut off would grow back—more than just hair and nails. John had an abundance of life.

This was a part of the curse. In the same way, he could not die a permanent death, except through a surrender he would never accept. That would be a curse more terrible than this one he suffered. Even now, after more than a hundred deaths of different kinds, the worst part of his life was seeing everyone and everything he'd ever loved leave the world forever—and leave him. He paused to calm down. It didn't help to spend a lot of time dwelling on what he couldn't change.

John was pretty sure that Bob had become aware of him, and maybe questioned his own sanity. Also, Bob must have done something terrible in his life. It was this combination that was dangerous. The one thing John wondered was whether Bob had discovered his new name. Obviously, he hadn't, or that name would have been used in the message. But the enemy now knew the old name—the one Bob knew, and the police might very well discover that name, too.

It was time to do something about this dangerous soldier. Of course, the creature couldn't be killed, but the creature's form could be destroyed, and for a long while. It would take a special kind of weapon. There was only one such weapon that John could access, a 'gift', of sorts, passed to him by Uriel after it was no longer needed. John would need to retrieve it from its hiding place, and to do that he would have to return to his body. After he brought the weapon back, he'd find a way to attract the soldier's attention. That wouldn't be hard. The police could help.

John took one more look at the chief investigator—Sandra. There was something about her, an internal conflict. He looked deeper and understood what to do. She was marked, a malignant stain on her soul, although she was obviously working to make amends. He hoped she had time for that.

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PART 5—Sandra

They had a lead. One of the women at the wedding reception was a psychiatrist, and the financial forensics team had found a record of an electronic payment to her practice from one of the attendees at the retirement party.

A man named Robert Clarke had recently begun making regular payments to her. It wasn't much of a lead, but it was the first link they'd found between people at the two events. Sandra had already filed for a warrant to get the records of the victim, Robert, from Dr. Schiavone's office. Sandra was on her way to meet with the man's widow, to convince her to agree with the request—that might make getting the warrant easier. Sandra wasn't going to wait.

The process of getting the medical record from Dr. Schiavone's office turned out to be easier than Sandra expected, and the team had been going through the notes and recordings made by the psychiatrist all day.

Mr. Clarke had been seeing hallucinations. People or creatures appeared in his home almost every night. He wasn't sure what triggered the hallucinations, but the first one he remembered seeing was a man on the street—someone with whom he believed he used to work, a man named Withers. That man appeared not to have aged, even though they'd worked together thirty years before.

Of course Clarke assumed that he was mistaken about the identity of the man, despite following him and having listened to him speak. Shortly after that incident, Mr. Clarke began having nightmares—terrible violent nightmares in which an 'evil creature', or creatures, visited his dreams. Soon after that he began seeing these creatures in his bedroom at night, whenever he woke up.

Dr. Schiavone prescribed a drug to help Mr. Clarke with the hallucinations, as well as a sleep aid, so he wouldn't wake up so much. The combination of drugs and hypnotic therapy had helped him sleep better, although he still had hallucinations now and then. Clarke was learning to cope with his fears, understanding that they *were* in fact just hallucinations.

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Sandra and her team couldn't do anything about the hallucinations, but they could follow this one narrow connection to the past. They attempted to locate the man Clarke believed he'd seen. The name from years ago was Jeremy Withers. That was from a recording in the psychiatrist's office. Clarke believed he worked downtown somewhere, but didn't know the man's new name. They searched the Boston City and Massachusetts state records, but couldn't find a photograph of Withers. It looked like a dead end.

After a week of searching for other past co-workers, the team located a Ms. Connors. She'd worked with Clarke and the other person—Withers. Sandra went to see her personally, hoping to learn something about the mysterious Mr. Withers.

"I know it's been a long time, but is it possible that you might have a photograph of Mr. Clarke and Mr. Withers from when you all worked together?"

"I might, but I have no idea where it would be. That is, if I didn't throw everything out."

Sandra looked at the woman, but didn't say anything.

"Oh, I'll take a look this week. But it might take some time. Everything was put into boxes when I retired, and if it wasn't something that I needed I didn't unpack. The old photos—if they still exist—might be in the attic."

"I'd really appreciate it if you could look. It might be nothing, but it's a lead. Do you remember this Mr. Withers?"

"Jeremy? Yeah, he was quiet. Intense. A good worker, and smart. We were so surprised when he left all of a sudden."

"What do you mean all of a sudden?"

"I mean one day he just didn't show up for work, and we never saw him again. I don't remember that much about him, but the way he left stuck in my head. It was so sudden. As the secretary, I was asked to try to find out if anything had happened to him, but his house was empty and there was no forwarding address. It was like he never existed."

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“How about his social security number, and his bank account? Didn’t he get direct deposit?”

The woman laughed. “That’s a lot to remember from so long ago. No. I don’t remember.”

“Do you recall anything else—anything at all—about him? I’m trying to locate him as a potential witness to a crime.”

“Surely he must have had other jobs. Can’t you find him from one of his other jobs? You mentioned social security.”

“I don’t know what his social security number is. The company records don’t go back that far. All I know is that he worked with Robert Clarke, and he can’t answer questions. Do you know anyone from back then who might have maintained contact with him?”

Ms. Connors took a deep breath and let it out, while shaking her head. “No. I’m sorry. Oh. One thing I do remember about him: he spoke more than one language. The boss sometimes used him when he had a telecon with foreign clients.”

“Do you remember which languages?”

“I know one must have been French, because we had a big contract with a firm in Canada, and I’m pretty sure he spoke some kind of Asian language—probably Japanese, because we bought a lot of electronic components from there.”

“What did the company make?”

“Portable phones. This was before those small cell phones were around. They were bulky, fitted into a kind of suitcase.”

Sandra’s team continued digging for Jeremy Withers, but it seemed every record that might have identified him was missing. A few of the older people, like Ms. Connors, vaguely remembered the ‘man who disappeared’ but not much more than that.

PART 6—John

John, back from his trip, took in a game at Fenway. Baseball was one of the things he liked best about America. He was wearing a Red Sox cap, along with tinted glasses that changed with the level of light. It was still too bright for his eyes tonight, but John thought that the ultra-dark sunglasses he preferred made him stand out too much. He'd grown a beard during the trip and was wearing lightweight padding under his clothes to make himself look heavier.

The whole time he was gone, John kept watching the news, waiting for yet another massacre, but—thankfully—that didn't happen. Getting the weapon through customs had worried him at first, but then he decided not to hide it. He treated it as an antique. Of course, no one knew quite how old this antique really was—or who its maker had been. He'd made sure the sword was completely enclosed in plastic—hermetically sealed. Ordinary mortals couldn't touch its blade without being burned, and without setting off a chain of events, none of which John was prepared to explain. Once this soldier was taken care of he would need a new hiding place for the sword—before he started a new life.

John still wanted to be able to go to baseball games, and to watch his now-beloved Red Sox play occasionally. Baltimore might be a likely place to live for a while. It was far enough away from Boston, and yet in an area large enough for a man to disappear.

After the game, John made a phone call and then returned to his downtown apartment. He'd used a throwaway phone and called from a neighborhood other than his own. Now all he needed to do was to wait for the investigators to realize who'd left the message, and then for the soldier to react. The creature would then realize he could be found through the police. The question was: could he keep whomever he used as bait alive? He would try, but even if he couldn't, sacrificing one life to avoid more massacres was an acceptable trade.

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PART 7—Sandra

Sandra listened to the phone message along with her team. The sound engineer had done his best to bring out background sounds, so they might be able to tell where the man was—this Withers guy—when he called. But there was nothing on the recording but his voice. They'd written down the information and had tested the email address to make sure it was real.

Sandra listened to the recording one more time.

Hello. My name was Jeremy Withers and I used to know Robert Clarke. Don't try tracking this number. The phone is already at the bottom of Boston Harbor. I'm the person the killer at the two murder sites wants—the wedding reception and the retirement party. As far as the killer is concerned, anyone who knows me, or might have a connection to me is an enemy. Sandra, we need to meet. I will send an email describing a time and place for you to go tomorrow night. Come alone and use the T. Don't bring a car. I'll be watching, and if I think you aren't alone, or if there's something suspicious about you I won't be there, and you'll never hear from me again.

Sandra hit the play again button, but this time the recording didn't play.

"What happened? Where's the message?"

The sound engineer examined the digital file, but it was now empty.

"What the hell?"

"What?"

"It's gone."

"How can it be gone? We just played it."

"I don't know. But it is."

"What about the backup?"

The engineer accessed the backup system and reloaded the file, using a different filename, just in case. It was also empty.

"How did he do that? It's like the file just erased *itself*."

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“Is that possible? Could he have done that remotely?”

“No. This is *our* system. He just left a message.”

“Could he have infiltrated the system?”

“I . . . I just don’t know *how*.”

“So we’ve got nothing.”

“We have his email address.”

“Whoop-tee-doo. Can we trace him when he uses it?”

“Not if he uses a VPN.”

“What’s that?”

“A Virtual Private Network. That’s a kind of service that allows you to encrypt your connections and to appear to be in different places. It could be unwound . . . eventually, maybe. But I wouldn’t know how.”

“So this guy may be some kind of tech wizard.”

“If he can get our own system to erase his voice then the word wizard, without tech, might be closer to the mark.”

“Okay. First we have a killer who can vanish into thin air and now this guy, who can make our own data files vanish. Maybe he’s the killer.”

“I wouldn’t take bets either way. This should not be possible.”

“But it is,” Sandra said.

“I wouldn’t go if I were you.”

“I have no choice. This is our only lead.”

“Take backup, and take a *big* gun.”

“Somehow, I don’t think that will matter. I will take the backup, though.”

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PART 8—John

John watched Sandra from his seat at the rear of the subway car. They were riding the Blue Line and he'd instructed her to ride from one end to the other. He noted who got onto the train when she did and he'd sensed that there were two others with her, a tactical commander, named Will, and one of his team, named Dan. Will was in the same car she and John rode, while Dan was one car back.

John was dressed as an old woman, using crutches—someone neither of the tactical agents would notice. The sword was attached to one of the crutches and it blended in with the crutch's shape. He pretended to sleep as he left his body behind and reached into the minds of both tactical agents to make them sleep. They were both out within seconds.

The train was nearing the Airport Station—John knew the airport area well. He had worked there before, cleaning, and it was easy to get a rental car there to transport them both to a more isolated area.

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PART 9—Sandra

The old woman from the rear of the car was moving toward the train's doors. As she passed Sandra's seat, the woman seemed to stumble and reached out a hand to steady herself using Sandra's arm. She was aware that the woman's grip was much stronger than it should have been, but before she could react her consciousness faded.

When she became aware again, Sandra was confused, sitting on a log in a forest staring into space. Then she remembered.

A man was facing her, also seated. His age was hard to judge. He appeared to be in either his late thirties or early forties, but there was something strange about him. Brown eyes stared into hers. They were strange and frightening to look at, both tired and full of power at the same time. The contrast reminded her of something she'd read, but then her eyes were drawn to the sword that was resting across his thighs. It was huge—a great two-handed broadsword that flashed even in the dim moonlight.

"It's nice to meet you in person, Sandra," the man said. "I mean you no harm, and would have left you alone—if I could have."

"Are you Jeremy Withers?"

"I was. That was one name I used . . . for a while."

"Who are you, really?"

"It doesn't matter."

"But you're the one in the message, right? The enemy of whatever killed all those people?"

"I suppose, but in reality both the creature and I are just pawns."

"Creature? What killed the people in those buildings?"

"You're about to find out. It should be here before long."

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Sandra shuddered. “Why am I here?”

“I needed to send the killer a message—like a beacon. And I know it’s watching you—waiting.”

“The killer? Why would he watch me?”

“You’re a useful set of eyes, like a window into the world—for creatures like this.”

“Why me?”

“Because you carry a mark.”

“What mark?”

“You’ve committed murder and that act weighs on your conscience. I can see it, and if I can see it then the creature certainly can. That mark opens you up to the enemy and to his agents—eyes and ears and thoughts to be exploited for their purpose.”

Sandra felt her heart stop beating for a second and bile rose in the back of her throat. A familiar guilt opened up inside of her again, a black pit that was always just below the surface of her consciousness—and always with her. “How? How did you know?”

“I’m not sure about the mechanics of it, but I can see these things in other people. I began to see it long ago. I’m not judging you. I carry a mark, too, but mine is hidden from the enemy and his agents, just as I’m hidden from them. They can only see me through the eyes of someone like you—and if you suspect who I am, it draws their attention. Plus they’re watching you because you’re involved in the search. They know how to use you to find me, but that’s okay, Sandra. I need to be seen tonight.”

“Why did you bring me here, to this forest? What’s going to happen to me?”

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“It’s better if we’re in an isolated area when the creature comes—somewhere people won’t be hurt, and where they can’t see what happens. But when the creature comes, as it most assuredly will, you need to get away fast. I left the keys in the car’s ignition. And Sandra, there’s still time for you to make amends. Murder can be forgiven. You can even forgive yourself. Consider this a warning.”

“What are you going to do with the sword?”

“I’m going to try to destroy the creature. This is the only weapon I have that can harm it.”

“Where did you get it?”

“It was given to me by an entity of a higher order—you would call him a cherub—after the sword had served its purpose. I used to think it was a gift, but now I’m not so sure. Now I think it’s just another part of my curse. Having such a weapon creates an obligation to resist the enemy directly. If I didn’t have this sword I would have run, because without it there is no way I could destroy the creature’s form.”

“How soon?” There was a crashing noise of branches breaking in the forest, followed by what sounded like a thousand sheets of paper blowing in the wind.

“It’s here. You should go now.”

“I can’t just leave you.”

“You have to. You need to live, to repent. If you die tonight, you’ll be damned forever.”

“Who are you?” she asked again.

The man looked at her, as though weighing what to tell her. “I am just a man.”

Sandra frowned as she stood to go, but her feet were still rooted to the spot. She wanted to see the creature that had done so much harm to so many people—until she felt it coming.

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An icy chill filled the forest and frost formed on the leaves of the nearby trees. Darkness filled her vision as her sight narrowed until she could no longer see. Fear seized her heart and Sandra fell to her knees as all her strength fled.

But then another light filled the space. The man, Withers, was grasping the sword by its hilt, and a bright blue flame had erupted along the blade. It lit the trees and brought warmth to her heart. Sandra felt stronger, able to move again. But she still had questions—she wanted to know more about this man, and the creature.

Finally, she saw it. A deep shadow strode toward the man, tall and wide, a dark shape with extensions that resembled wings that seemed to fill the forest.

“Get away!” Withers told her. “Now!”

Sandra ran as fast as her legs would carry her. She looked back once. The last thing she saw was the shadow leaping toward the man. He looked small and insignificant compared to the creature’s vast size, but then the flaming blade passed all the way through the shadow, cutting it in half, and she heard a deep voice cry out in anguish. The ground shook from the power in the voice and Sandra was forced to press her hands over her ears, but that didn’t stop the pain she felt in her head. She felt weak again and then fell into blackness.

When Sandra awoke she was lying in a hospital bed. There was an IV in her hand and Will, the tactical team lead, was asleep in a chair by the window.

When she moved, he woke up.

“What happened to Withers?” she asked.

“We didn’t see him, and didn’t see you leave the train. Something made us both sleep. I thought we’d lost you until the call came.”

“What call?”

“A man contacted me and told me where to find you. He said you needed help.”

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“It must have been Withers.”

“What happened?”

Sandra shook her head. “I’m not sure I can trust what I saw. He must have hypnotized me somehow and then drove me to the forest in a car.”

“The forest? We found you at a car rental near Logan. You were sitting in a Chevy.”

“I can only assume he brought me back. Of course most of what I thought I saw may have been a dream, or a hypnotic suggestion.”

“What about the killer?”

“Again, I’m not sure what was real, but from what I remember, Withers fought some kind of creature, using a big sword. He must have won the fight.”

“Do you think the killings are over?”

“My heart says yes, but I still don’t know exactly what happened, and my mind is rejecting what I saw.”

“What are you going to do?”

Sandra thought about the conversation she’d had with Withers—the man who called himself ‘just a man’. Despite her sense of reason, she believed what he had told her, and she thought about his suggestion—about what she should do. “I’m going to request that someone else be assigned to this case, and then I’m going to take some time off.”

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PART 10—John

After he left the woman and the car in an area near the airport, and after he'd contacted the tactical team leader to let them know where Sandra could be found, John headed for the old cathedral. Once there he broke into the crypt and retrieved the bag he'd concealed there some eighty years before.

He had a number of caches like this one. They contained money in the form of one-ounce gold coins—enough value to travel and to establish a new life. His next task would be to find a hiding place for the sword, and then to flesh out his new identity. He'd done this many, many times before, and there was no end to the running in sight.

Baltimore. That's where he'd live. It was far enough away to be safe from being recognized. Of course time would eventually take care of that, too. He rubbed his clean-shaven scalp and inserted the prosthetic devices inside his mouth. In a month, he would be settled into a new home and a new job. John didn't care about money and could have fled to the wilderness, but he needed to stay engaged with other people, and with the world. Eternal life spent in solitude would be as bad as surrendering to hell.

End

John's story will continue in the novel 'Disobedience', with an anticipated release expected sometime in 2019 or 2020.