

RAGING AGAINST THE STORM

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It was a bright and sunny day in the park, much too nice a day to die.

The man calling himself Barry Cochran brushed back his thick black hair and decided against stroking the matching moustache; that would be an affectation too far.

The horn-rimmed glasses held clear glass, they were another part of the mask he wore. He had been seated in the warm park for over an hour, but he was a patient man. His occupation was dependent on steady nerves and a vast reserve of patience. Waiting for the person he was being paid to kill sometimes took far too long, but if he had been a man who liked things to happen quickly he wouldn't have been as good at his job as he was.

Or at least he used to be good. The recent mistake was playing on his mind more than he cared to admit. It helped that he wore different cloaks, changed his appearance and his name with a regular frequency. It meant that any doubts or fears he might have harboured never quite caught up with him. He could usually rely on that. It allowed him to keep any negativity at bay.

He gave in to temptation and moved his fingers lovingly over the fake hair above his lips. He fancied it gave him the air of a man who was pondering a difficult question. He was dressed as a successful businessman might be, perhaps a banker, in an expensive suit, highly polished shoes and sombre, but high quality, silk tie. At his feet was a brown leather briefcase which was open. Inside was a Glock 99, not at all one of his usually preferred pistols. He had selected it because of its slim-line design, for ease of concealment. Flatter than the other Glocks, it had a comfortable hold on the trigger. A single stack with a .45 calibre, a magazine capacity of six, it was perfect for the manner he intended to complete the job.

He was relentless in his pursuit of professional perfection, always had been, and now, with a large point to prove, he was fiercely single minded. He had borne the sneers of his paymasters as they recruited him after the debacle on the Bahamas. Fees were downsized considerably. Targets were less important than he was used to.

Today was a typical example of the smaller, less elaborate, tasks he was entrusted with. He had no qualms about killing a woman, after all the failed hit had been female. He had made up some of his self esteem by killing the woman's lover, but the initial miss rankled. Today he had chosen to kill at close quarters, here in the open park, in broad daylight, and with the watching eyes of whoever noticed what was happening.

He hoped that by fulfilling these more mundane jobs that he could once again command the hits and the fees that he had been used to, and which he deserved. He was angry that he was reduced to having to audition for work. Surely his reputation should have negated that need. But he was a practical man, and he would do what he had to in order to win back his good name.

I stood and winced at the shot of pain that lanced through my head. Last night's alcohol consumption was making its presence felt. The bright Bahamian sunshine wasn't helping, seemingly piercing the sunglasses I wore.

The dry grass clung to the knees of my crumpled jeans but I didn't have the energy to brush it off. I didn't have the enthusiasm for much these days, not since Stevie had been killed.

I stared down at the headstone that bore the date of her death. It was still unreal. That I would never see her again, that I would never listen to her lectures about the casual way I

led my life. 'You're incorrigible, Harry Beck,' she would say, but all the while there was laughter in her eyes and on her lips. We were a team and now I was floundering without her.

My days were spent mooching about on the boat, killing time until I could get back to what I was best at these days, drinking myself into a stupor. I knew it was driving Katy away but I couldn't stop. My wife was supportive, but only up to a point. I could understand it, I really could. Stevie wasn't a romantic interest, far from it, but the way I was reacting to her murder she might as well have been. I was devastated, but much of that was down to guilt. Katy knew all that and she was trying, but I was working just as hard at flinging all her good intentions back into her face.

'Stevie,' I whispered to the neatly tended grass patch allocated to her in this tranquil cemetery. 'I'm sorry.'

It was a familiar refrain, and one I would no doubt be echoing in some bar tonight before the drinks proved too many for me and I passed out. Luckily I had enough friends who watched over me and made sure I was laid in a bed or a back room until morning, when the demons came out to play again.

The funeral had been dreadful. Everyone I knew was there but we all felt empty and alone. The one person we all wanted, the one I needed to be there, was the reason we were all gathered in the first place. I got drunk that night, but it was a mere dress rehearsal for the days and weeks that dragged into months.

I watched as a white-cheeked pintail made a splash in the small pond behind me as it took flight. Like me it seemed devoid of energy, and after a second or so it descended back onto the water where it floated listlessly.

I freed the hip flask from my back pocket and raised it to my lips. Rum tasted good at any time of the day. I toasted the duck and then turned and held the flask aloft as I silently spoke to Stevie.

'I'll get him, don't you worry about that.'

Who was I kidding? I was standing, or rather slouching, while my business went into freefall, my marriage was on the rocks, and I couldn't remember the last time when an alcohol fuelled headache hadn't slammed about inside my brain like a wrestler pressing into a cloverleaf hold.

The rum tasted sour on my lips. I lifted the flask and poured what was left onto the grass on Stevie's grave. She would have shouted me out at the waste of good liquor.

Cochran was suddenly alert. His target had entered the park to the right. He stretched out his arm along the back of the bench, casually, so if anyone was watching it would look like a normal move a tired and stressed businessman might make. His fingers touched the cool metal of the Glock.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the woman push the pram. She looked relaxed, and there was no reason that she knew of why she shouldn't be. Her crime was a small one, and she might even have been excused if she didn't even recognize what she had done wrong.

None of that interested Cochran. He never knew what his hits had done to warrant their execution. He liked it like that. To keep them anonymous made his job a little easier. When it got personal, as it occasionally did, it affected him far more than he would ever admit to anyone. The Bahamas hit, both the failed one and the final successful one, had given him more emotion than was good for him. He wanted to draw a veil over the proceedings and move on.

He hadn't expected that she would be pushing a pram. He had read in the file that she was married and that she was a mother. The baby wasn't hers, it couldn't be, he knew that from her notes. She had a child, a son, away in boarding school, paid for by the father. It was

a small complication. There were plenty of people around who would ensure the baby was cared for until the father or the family came and took it in.

He pulled the briefcase onto his lap and reached inside. The Glock fitted into the palm of his hand smoothly and easily as he knew it would. It was a good weight to pull up from his side, fire two shots, and then place into his jacket pocket.

The woman was about seven feet away from him now, walking slowly and without concern. She glanced at the man sitting on the park bench and a smile was forming on her mouth when he stood and looked at her.

That was when she became alert. There was something about his eyes, an intensity that unnerved her. She stopped walking and looked down into the pram at her sister's baby, sleeping peacefully.

The man held one arm down by his side, the other arm holding the weight of a briefcase. He was staring intently at her.

She plucked at the handle of the pram, thinking she could turn and run, but not wanting to leave the baby.

Cochran stood at her side, saw the fear in her eyes as he lifted his hand and pointed the Glock at her face. She flinched but the shot came anyway. He fired twice, in quick succession and the woman didn't have time to scream out.

As she fell to the ground one hand groped for the handle of the pram, in a futile attempt to save the baby.

Cochran was already walking past her and away to the far corner of the park.

It was several seconds before anyone noticed that the pretty young woman pushing the pram was slumped behind it. The baby began to cry. A jogger slowed and looked at the scene before running on.

Minutes passed before people began to realise what had happened and called the cops.

By then Barry Cochran was walking along the street, and was about to disappear for good when the killer adopted his next identity.

I threw a salute at the headstone and turned away.

It was a typically beautiful and sunny Bahamas day, the kind of day I should have been out on the sea, sailing, lost in the splendour of the open ocean. As it was the sun hurt my eyes, and the grass at my feet seemed to have been trampled once too often by other mourners.

My feet slopped over the grass and onto the gravel path that took me away from the guilt, and led me to the excesses of the night ahead.

I was sure there were things I should be doing, places I should have been, people that I should be speaking with. I didn't care. I didn't want to see anyone or do anything.

I lifted the flask to my lips, forgetting that it was empty. I thrust it back into my pocket and swore.

All I wanted was to have a drink in my hand and to begin the dance down into the descent of unconsciousness.

All I wanted was to forget. As usual my intentions were about to be sent reeling by the unexpected.

All I wanted was a quiet night of oblivion. What I got was a path into a whole different set of events.