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Standalone Title

Assassination of a Dignitary

**CAROLYN
ARNOLD**

**PAST
DEEDS**

HIBBERT & STILES
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One

Arlington, Virginia

Thursday, October 24th, 5:56 AM Eastern Standard Time

The sun was just coming up, and the sniper's hands were sweaty as she looked through the rifle's scope to the streets eight stories below and point eight miles away. In mere minutes, the target would be dead, and she would walk away. Scot-free. But a lot of variables needed to be accounted for to pull off the shot, including the vehicle and pedestrian traffic that was picking up and the wind coming out of the west at two miles an hour. None of this was a challenge to her, given that she was a skilled sniper, but her nerves threatened to upset the entire operation. She wasn't a killer by nature, but she was good at it—and maybe that meant she was supposed to do it.

She'd do as she was taught and remove emotion from the equation, focus on her purpose, and the end result. Her target certainly deserved to die—and he was one of many.

She checked the time on her watch. 5:56 AM.

"Fortuna favet fortibus," she chanted. Fortune favors the strong.

She readjusted the rifle's stock, letting it sink comfortably into the meat of her shoulder, pocketed there. The rifle was like an extension of her body, another appendage. Peering through the scope again, she took a few grounding breaths.

The terrain was different from her past. In place of desert was concrete jungle. Instead of emptiness, people scurried along sidewalks, rushing to get to wherever they needed to go. They had no idea what was about to take place just outside Wilson Place, a few blocks to the south.

Her mark was currently inside the building, but he'd be emerging in mere minutes. His routine was boring and predictable, which made it easy for her. She knew that every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday morning, he'd leave the condo structure at six o'clock in the morning and head to his office.

She was homed in on the front door and watched as the doorman, who had been standing sentinel to the right of it, sprang into action. She held a breath, prepared to take the shot when a thirtysomething woman stepped outside and headed east.

The doorman closed the door after her and returned to his post, but quickly hurried back to open the door again.

This is it!

The sniper took another calming breath, intensifying focus through the scope.

The door was opened, and the target emerged.

Right on time.

The sniper slowly squeezed the trigger and watched the bullet find its mark.

FBI Quantico Office

Thursday, October 24th, 7:05 AM Eastern Standard Time

A sniping took place in Arlington, Virginia, in the Clarendon District about an hour ago, at oh-six-hundred hours, outside of a condo building called Wilson Place.”

FBI Supervisory Special Agent in Charge Jack Harper started his briefing with one heck of a punch. Jack was my boss and the leader of a team with the Behavioral Analysis Unit, which consisted of myself Brandon Fisher, Paige Dawson, and a new member, Kelly Marsh. Kelly was a former homicide detective with the Miami Police Department and had recently replaced Zach Miles, who took a desk job as an FBI analyst because he was starting a family and wanted to increase his chances of returning home at night. Risk was minimal behind a monitor versus staring down the barrel of a gun held by a psychopath—which we did far more often than I’d like.

The team was in a conference room at the FBI office in Quantico, Virginia, and I was seated directly across the table from Jack. Arlington was essentially our neighbor, but I wasn’t overly familiar with the city’s segments. “Clarendon? What kind of neighborhood is that?”

“Clarendon is in the downtown area, near the Courthouse District. Lots of condo buildings, upper-class.” Jack responded without enthusiasm, proof he wasn’t too thrilled that I’d cut in with questions before he’d finished laying out the situation. He continued. “Several civilians have been taken to the hospital for stress-induced illnesses. Panic attacks and the like, but there is

only one reported casualty. A prosecuting attorney by the name of Darrell Reid.”

I'd keep my thoughts to myself for now, but prosecutors, by the very nature of their jobs, attracted enemies—though revenge usually took the form of a bullet from a handgun or a stabbing, maybe strangulation. So why had he been taken out so dramatically?

“We’ve been asked to look at the evidence, establish a profile on the sniper, and conduct a threat analysis,” Jack said. “We need to know what we’re dealing with here. Was this an isolated incident, or are more attacks planned?”

I looked at Kelly, her shoulder-length brown hair, brown eyes, and...neon-green nail polish? *To each her own*, but I also couldn't help but think that for her first case with the BAU, she'd netted an anomaly. Our team was normally assigned to profile and track down serial killers, but a shooting like the one in Arlington, given its vicinity to Washington, DC, needed to be handled swiftly.

“My guess is the area's busy this time of day,” Paige started. “The fact there was only one death makes it seem like Reid was targeted.”

“I thought the same,” I admitted, “but why such a drastic means for taking him out? Regardless, we're looking for a skilled sniper. Someone who is former military or law enforcement? Someone who still is?”

Jack looked at me with a serious expression.

“The sniper might be skilled, but not necessarily intelligent.” Kelly tossed out, and we all looked at her.

“We're listening,” I said, challenging her to continue. When Kelly and I had first met during an investigation this past spring, we hadn't exactly hit it off: we butted heads repeatedly. It had taken facing down a serial killer together to morph the dynamics of our relationship into something congenial.

“Let's say Reid was the target.” She gestured, her arm shooting out emphatically, her green polish grabbing my attention again. “Why not shoot several people to throw off the investigation? We wouldn't know who the intended victim was, and it would take longer to hunt down motive.”

“We're just getting started. Motive is likely still a long way off,” I peacocked. “Besides, it's also possible the sniper could have missed the intended target and hit Reid by mistake.”

“Not based on what’s come in to us,” Jack stated sourly. “Reid was hit directly in the chest. Now each of you has a folder.” He laid a hand on his and gestured to the ones in front of each of us on the table. “Nadia prepared them, but there’s very little there.”

Nadia Webber was our assigned analyst who worked out of Quantico along with us. But while our work mostly took us into the field, she remained holed up in a windowless office.

The three of us opened our folders. As Jack had said, there wasn’t much. Only Reid’s driver’s license photo blown up to letter size, his basic background, and contact information for the building’s management.

“Nadia’s in communication with officers on the ground and is gathering as much intel as she can,” Jack added.

Kelly held Reid’s background in one hand and pressed a fingertip to the full-page photo of Reid. “What do we know about him besides he was a prosecutor?”

“Nothing much. Everything we know is in there.” Jack nudged his head toward the file. “Keep in mind that the first rule of profiling is never jump to a motive. We do that, and we might as well hand in our badges. Our priority right now is whether or not we can rule out terrorism.”

Kelly slid her bottom lip through her teeth, clearly uncomfortable by Jack’s mini lecture. But she’d appeared frazzled from the moment she came in the door this morning, as if she were running behind and trying to catch up. She’d come to realize soon enough that this job usually felt like that. After all, we were usually steps behind the unsubs, the unidentified subjects.

Kelly scanned the file. “You mentioned terrorism, Jack, but on the surface, Reid doesn’t seem your typical terrorist’s target. And don’t terrorists like to make a bigger splash? The more blood spilled, the better?”

“It’s far too early to rule out Reid’s attractiveness to a terrorist. We don’t know enough about him,” Jack replied and studied his new agent as if he were just getting to know her. But part of why I hadn’t liked Kelly at first was because she and Jack seemed to know each other too well. As it turned out, Jack had served in the military with her grandfather and had known Kelly from her days at the FBI Academy.

Kelly's eyes pinched with concentration. "As a prosecutor, sure, he'd make enemies, but given how he was killed, maybe we're looking at a hired gun."

"Which would also imply he was targeted, but it's too soon." Jack's tone was cool, correcting, and one I recognized well from my days as a rookie agent—days that were only two years behind me. Any concern I had that Kelly would receive special treatment due to her past connection with Jack was eroding with his rebukes.

"Let's move." Jack stood, and the rest of us followed and headed toward the door. "Brandon, you'll be with Paige, and Kelly, you'll come with me. We'll meet at ground zero. When you get there, ask for Captain Anthony Herrera from the Homeland Security Division of the Arlington Police Department."

My heart paused in dread: *I am paired with Paige*. Guess I should have seen it coming. Jack had mentored me as a new agent, and now it was Kelly's turn. I put on a smile for Paige's benefit, and she returned it, but her expression faded as quickly as mine. Let's just say we had a past, which held no place in the present.

I'd been a student at the FBI Academy, and she, a teacher. In a moment of weakness, I'd ignored the fact I was married, and we fell into bed together—more than once. Big mistake, and nothing to be proud of. That might have happened four years ago, but our efforts to bury the past were thwarted when we'd both ended up on Jack's team. And it didn't help that a lingering attraction and unexplored feelings were still there.

"That's not a problem, is it?" Jack had his gaze set on me. He had found out about Paige and me, but he let us sort things out, making it clear it wasn't an option for us to fraternize romantically and remain on his team.

"No, not at all. It's fine." That's what I said, even as sirens were sounding in my head.

I was divorced now, not because of my affair with Paige, but rather just irreconcilable differences. My ex couldn't stand my job with the FBI. Again, nothing to do with Paige being my colleague. Anyway, Paige and I were making the best of it, and I was currently in a relationship with Becky, an officer from a neighboring county.

“Just keep your mind about you out there,” Jack cautioned all of us. “The sniper’s probably long gone, but there’s the chance they’ve stuck around to peck off some law enforcement. Vests are mandatory.”

Before the four of us made it to the door, Nadia entered the room.

“I haven’t been able to uncover any other shootings in the DC/Virginia area that are similar to this one,” she informed us.

“Expand the geography and keep looking.” Jack brushed past her.

The one thing that Kelly would quickly learn about Jack was that he liked answers, not updates for the sake of updates. Sometimes even those of us who had worked with him for years failed to remember that if we weren’t providing new information, we were a hindrance.

Three

Kelly felt like she was starting her life from scratch with a knot in her gut reminiscent of the first day of school after summer break. Jack had meant so much to her grandfather—and her grandfather to her—that she just wanted to impress him. It had taken her six wardrobe changes until she settled on a cream blouse and a black pantsuit devoid of all personality, but it was clean, crisp, professional, and it communicated confidence. She might not be feeling it, but that didn't mean her outfit couldn't say it.

She split her attention between looking at the road and glancing over at Jack in the driver's seat. Sometimes it was hard to believe she was actually here—her dream of becoming an FBI agent finally realized. She'd wanted this since she'd graduated the academy eleven years ago, in her early twenties, but life had other plans for her, and the bumps in the road all started with her mother.

She wasn't exactly the saint of motherhood—who was, really? But Kelly's mom had served time for murder. Self-defense, really, even if the victim had been Kelly's father. Kelly had been six at the time, but in her twenties when her mother was released from prison and ran off. After Kelly's granddad had a heart attack, Kelly left Virginia to live and care for him in Florida. The dream of being FBI had become nothing more than a flickering memory. It wasn't until this past spring, when she'd called Jack to Miami to help with a case, that she realized she still hungered to be FBI. And now that she had the job, she was determined to keep it, and that would mean impressing Jack.

She opened the folder in her lap and eyed...*bright green nails!* She'd meant to go with something more neutral before today and resisted the urge to sit on her hands.

Come on, Marsh, pull yourself together. Get your mind back on the case!

The information packet didn't offer much. On paper, Darrell Reid looked like a regular guy: father, husband, prosecutor. What had he done to get himself killed? Was he even the true target?

Jack's caution that it was too soon to conclude anything, including motive, wasn't far from her mind, but she felt she had to say something useful. She scanned Reid's background, groping.

"Reid's married and has a seventeen-year-old son." The instant the words were out, she felt like a rambling fact giver. Jack could have read that much from the file himself; he probably had. She needed to offer something fresh and intelligent, or Jack might start to rethink bringing her on board. "He's worked for the commonwealth's attorney's office for ten years," she added. "That's certainly enough time to build up enemies...assuming he was the true target." She was starting to feel she couldn't say anything right.

Jack remained silent, lowered his window, and lit up a cigarette. Technically, he shouldn't be smoking in a government vehicle, but who would be brave enough to give Jack grief about it—or anything for that matter?

"You know, smoking isn't good for you." She'd heard the words in her head as carefree banter, but they landed with more weight.

Jack angled his head toward her, and her stomach flopped. She should have kept her mouth shut.

"I shouldn't have—" She scrambled to backpedal.

Jack smiled at her. "You sound like Brandon."

"Ouch. Of all the things for you to say." She returned his smile. It hadn't been much of a secret that she and Brandon hadn't gelled immediately. Sadly, she'd come to realize part of the reason was they were too much alike. "I take it he doesn't care for your habit, either."

"Nope." Jack sucked back on the cigarette and blew the smoke out the window.

The cigarette cartons she'd seen in an airport duty-free shop flashed to mind. The warning was clear, printed in an open-face font about an inch high on a white band: SMOKING KILLS. She spoke the words out loud.

"So does our sniper," Jack countered drily.

She could have smacked herself for letting her guard down. They were headed to the scene of a fatal shooting; it wasn't the time for mindless chitchat. She would also do well to remember that Jack had the reputation of being one of the best FBI agents the Bureau had ever seen, and it would take more than a personal connection to remain part of his team.

She went back to burying her head in the file, wishing for a miraculous epiphany, but none came. Maybe she was stressing too much about impressing Jack and should let things flow naturally. It wasn't like she was a floundering rookie new to law enforcement. She'd solved countless murders during her six years as a homicide detective with the Miami PD.

Jack entered Arlington, and she marveled at the buildings and architecture. *The city is beautiful*, was her thought, just as Jack pulled up to the outskirts of the crime scene.

He parked the SUV and got out, and she wasn't far behind him. He held up his credentials to one of the officers securing the perimeter, and she followed his lead, feeling pride in displaying hers.

"I'm Supervisory Special Agent in Charge Jack Harper with the Behavioral Analysis Unit, and this is Probationary Agent Kelly Marsh. She's with me. We need to speak with Captain Herrera."

Kelly couldn't wait for the "probationary agent" to drop, but she had twenty-four months left before it technically wouldn't apply. She tried to tell herself that the time would go fast—it always did.

The officer studied her while she studied him. The name tag on his uniform read PEREZ.

"Sure, just give me a sec." Perez spoke into his radio, and voices came back telling him where to find Herrera. He went to repeat what was said to Jack, but he was already on the move.

"Thanks," Kelly called over a shoulder to Perez as she hurried to catch up with her boss.

Past the tape, Kelly took in three ambulances and ten police cruisers parked haphazardly, at different angles, lights flashing. Responders were moving about the area at a hustle, stark looks on their faces, each person driven by his or her mission.

She went past one ambulance that had its back doors open; a man in his forties was sitting on the back step, breathing from an oxygen mask. A female paramedic was by his side, and a police officer was standing nearby.

The voices of panicked civilians carried past the barricade—some in hushed tones, others shrill with excitement and fueled by adrenaline. But it was impossible not to feel the tendrils of death clawing in the air, clinging to the skin as gauze.

This “energy” was a reliable companion where there had been a fatality, and it was something Kelly was certain everyone felt—law enforcement and civilians alike. The only exemption would be the inanimate. The buildings that towered overhead, unable to feel anything. If she thought about it for too long, she’d become envious of the edifices, who stood as silent witnesses with no way of telling their stories.

A trim man of just over six feet, with a head of silver hair, was rushing toward them. His face was chiseled with resolve, but years of experience had left weariness lingering in his pale blue eyes and lines etched in his brow. He held out his hand toward Jack. “I’m Captain Anthony Herrera.”

“Supervisory Special Agent in Charge Jack Harper and Agent Kelly Marsh.”

Agent Marsh. Kelly liked the sound of that much better than *probationary agent.*

Herrera directed Kelly and Jack to follow him to a command trailer that had its front driver’s wheel up on the curb. Someone didn’t know how to park, but the vehicle was nestled in a pocket of calm surrounded by chaos.

“As you can see, it’s still a bit of a gong show,” Herrera said, pointing around. “By now, you know the victim was Darrell Reid, a prosecuting attorney. He had his wallet on him and his identification, so that preliminary step was easy. Of course, his wife will need to provide the formal ID. She has yet to be notified, and

we're doing our best to keep his identity out of the media until that happens. Sometimes that's easier said than done." Herrera flailed a hand toward the growing crowd of pedestrians. Back to Kelly and Jack, he said, "The other injured are being treated, and the DB is still on the ground."

Dead body.

"Other injured?" Kelly prompted. She recalled Jack mentioning panic attacks and wanted to confirm that's all they were looking at.

"Collateral injures. Just minor stuff...well, mostly." Captain Herrera squinted into the rising sun. "One woman has since been taken to the hospital, complaining of chest pain." Herrera pointed past a crowd of responders to a tall building across the street. "Shall we head that way?"

Jack started in the direction of Wilson Place, Kelly and the police captain in tow.

"The medical examiner on the way?" Jack asked over his shoulder.

The captain and Kelly scurried to catch up with Jack.

"Should be here any minute," Herrera said. "I put the call in just after arriving on scene at six fifteen."

That was only fifteen minutes from the time of the shooting. "Fast response time," she commented.

"We try."

An officer who had been standing in front of the victim stepped to the side as the three of them approached.

The body was supine on the sidewalk. His gray hair was groomed short, and his skin was pale. His brown eyes were large and open, unseeing marbles. His lips were curled in a mask of horror. Blood had poured from the chest wound and pooled to the left of the torso. Kelly kept her eyes on the corpse; she had never been fazed by the sight of death. Maybe it was because she had been exposed to it at such a young age, watching her father shot before her eyes. To her, death was nothing more than the logical progression of life—even when it was aided along.

Kelly hadn't thought of it earlier, but being there and seeing the body, it sank in that only a highly skilled sniper could have pulled

off a shot like this one—through a crowd, vehicle traffic, and net no other casualties. A head shot would have been far easier to execute.

Reid was dressed in a black suit, tailored to his fit frame, and a white-collared dress shirt with a tie. He wore a platinum wedding band on his left hand and a gold pinkie ring on his right. Peeking out from beneath his left sleeve was a Bulgari watch. Not that they were within Kelly's price range, but her best friend Brianna back in Miami had one, and it had cost five figures. Everything about the man's wardrobe was high-end, down to his Salvatore Ferragamo shoes, the toes of which pointed upward.

Kelly lifted her gaze, her eye on buildings farther away and her mind on where the sniper may have built a nest.

Another take at the body, she started to make deeper observations. Who had this man been in life, besides a prosecutor? The shoes, watch, and cut of suit didn't testify to someone working on the right side of the law. If Reid had been a defense attorney, the expensive wardrobe would be much easier to reconcile, as criminals paid much better than the government.

"Prosecutors make, what, fifty thousand a year?" she asked.

"Somewhere around there, depending on the office where they work," Herrera said.

Jack faced her, one eyebrow raised in curiosity. Maybe she should take that as a cue to keep quiet, but she felt doing so would be more of a crime than speaking up. Besides, she finally had a contribution worth making.

"The file we have on Reid said he worked out of the commonwealth's attorney's office. He was fifty-five, had seniority, but still, his clothes don't match up with his earnings." Kelly watched Jack as she spoke for any tells that she was displeasing him somehow, but she couldn't see any.

"What do you think that means?" Herrera was studying her, his eyes squinting in the rising sun.

She glanced at Jack, briefly tempted to elaborate on her leanings toward Reid possibly being involved in criminal activity or on the take, but without anything to back up her suspicions, she thought it best to keep quiet. "Too soon to say," she said, pegging that as the safe road and determined to remain there. She recalled Jack telling

them this neighborhood was near the Courthouse District. “Do we know why Reid was here this morning?”

“Wish I could tell you,” Herrera replied.

“Could be for his job,” she tossed out.

“Sure, but we don’t know for sure. It’s still something we need to figure out. That guy—” he gestured with his head toward the man sucking back on an oxygen mask “—is the building’s doorman. He might talk to you, but my men haven’t been able to get much out of him.”

Kelly was eager to head right over, but Jack remained grounded, his gaze on Reid. As she looked back at the gaping wound in the man’s chest, she was pretty sure the bullet had struck his heart. If it had, was that where the sniper had aimed and, if so, was it of any significance?

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