

SHELL GAME

I check in under the name of White. The bored desk clerk accepts my ID and credit card without question. And why not? I certainly look the part in my button-down shirt and pleated slacks, in costume right down to the polished loafers. To him and anyone else who might glance my way I'm another business traveler in town for a convention. Details are important in this line of work.

Chandeliers in the lobby, heavy wood accents and a few dusty plants. The elevator is fourteen steps away across polished marble. I turn toward the stairs instead, taking them two at a time, a suitcase in each hand. Down a long hallway, silent footfalls on thinning cut pile carpet. An old-fashioned door with a newfangled card key. I slide it and push my way in.

The room is a little pricier than I like. But what the heck, it's a business expense. Walking in I see the usual bathroom on the left, a sink and toy coffee maker on the right. A queen-sized bed, a dresser. A nice little nook with a desk, a couch and a gleaming new flat screen TV. And a window with a view. I check to see if it opens. The pane slides noiselessly up and cold February air stings my face. I look down twelve stories to the busy street below. A four-lane that dead-ends on the left in an awkward urban cul-de-sac, smack dab against a squat grey stone. Eight levels worth of parking garage on my right. A seven-storey apartment building across the street. Hard to get in, easy to get out.

Perfect.

I spend three days and nights there, making sure to be seen but invisible. I eat breakfast and dinner in the restaurant downstairs. During the day I walk the nearby streets, getting a feel for the area. I take my lunches at diners or delis, drink overpriced coffee at Starbucks. At night I watch TV, sip whisky and play solitaire. No phone calls, no room service, no pay-per-view.

Seen but invisible.

The fourth day is checkout day. It says so right on the door – all guests need to be out by noon. After breakfast I pack my Spartan belongings into my suitcase and place it on the bed. Then I unpack my other case, checking each piece before carefully assembling them. When I'm done I double-check everything. Satisfied, I look out the window for the hundredth time, my eyes sizing up the entrance to the building across the street. It's one of those older structures, recently renovated but showing its age just the same. Like plastic surgery on a fading film star. But the architecture doesn't overly interest me right now. All I care about is my line of sight. I detach the scope – no sense waving the long black barrel around in front of the window any more than I have to. Through cold crosshairs I scan the curb, the loading area, the bright blue canopy, the red-festooned doorman, a smattering of passersby and a couple of cars. I let my eye get accustomed to the world circumscribed by the scope. I crawl inside that world and make it my own. Weeks of preparation have all come to this. Butterflies flutter in my gut – I welcome them like old friends.

I check my watch. Fifteen minutes. This is when I wish I still smoked. Instead I think. About learning my father's trade. He learned it in 'Nam. For me it was the first Gulf War. The *first* Gulf war. How ridiculous. Typical American arrogance to put numbers on wars in a region that has never known peace. It was all rah-rah over there, kicking towel-head ass and taking camel-jockey names. Coming home was a letdown. I thought I'd be able to leave the killing behind but I guess it followed me back. Back to an empty apartment, a sterile job market and my father's gravestone. I made some calls, got in with the right people and picked up Dad's rifle. Not literally. He never would've willingly fired anything that wasn't made in the US of A. And I made a decent living for a few years. But it's not the same business I inherited from my father. Back in the day there were unwritten rules and honor still meant something. Nowadays it's dealers who like hip-hop instead of hop dealers. Booty calls instead of bootleggers. Thugz and gangstahs and other misspelled abominations. Dad would be disgusted. I can only hope that he'd be proud of the way I've tried to keep some honor in my work.

I look at my watch again. Eight minutes. Time to check my weapon one more time and secure it to the tripod. As I chamber the round I grimace. I've always hated these spouse hits, these .300 caliber divorces. Too many times the client gets cold feet before the hit and tries to cancel. Of course that's not so easy to do. I'm not some unshaven NRA flunky you meet at the back booth at Denny's and slip a fat envelope to under the table. There are layers between me and that first contact. In my world it's fifty percent up front, fifty percent when the job is done, all wired to an off-shore account. Once the wheels are set in motion it's all but impossible to shut it down. That's just one of the reasons I hate these spouse hits. But believe it or not the recession has hurt us all and I'm not in the position to turn away 50K anymore. So I try and put my own little twist on jobs like this: doing the hit when both of them are there. It's one thing to say you want someone dead, quite another to watch them crumple at your feet with a gaping chest wound, maybe even catching some splatter on your tweed jacket or D'Andre coat.

Lesson learned.

I don't need to check my watch to know it's time. But I do anyway. Details mater in this line of work. And right on cue, the drama unfolds twelve stories below.

They arrive like royalty. I know what to expect from my research: a big fish VP of a global corporation and his wife, an ex-model who from the looks of it still has a runway strut. Reginald and Helen Williamson: nouveau riche, too much money and not enough time. Slaves to their schedules, even if it kills them.

I shake my head. That's a bad joke, even by gallows humor standards.

The limo pulls up right on time. I blink twice then dope the scope. I center my body behind the tripod and center my mind with even breaths. Everything slows down, as if I'm watching it all play out underwater, gradually and silently. The car glides up to the curb and stops. The driver gets out and signals the doorman who comes quickly, no doubt hoping for a big tip. As he approaches the car door I catch a BMO out of the corner of my eye. Lower, and to my left. A dark figure is crouching on the

rooftop of the six-storey at the dead-end side of the street. My eye caught the sun glancing off the barrel of his...hunting rifle?

This is not good.

I swing my weapon his way and watch him through the scope. Dark glasses, ball cap, a god-damned cigarette in his mouth. And is that an old Remington 7600? What the hell does he think he's doing prancing around up there in broad daylight? I've never been a fan of rooftops – I feel exposed out in the open like that. But I have to admit he's got a nice clean bead on the Williamsons as the limo rolls to a stop and the doorman eases the door open. I look back at Mysterious Mr. Remington. He's playing it fast and loose, the rifle propped up on the ledge and aimed right at the limo. *Un-fucking-believable*. Is this whack-job planning on shooting at *my* mark?

The answer comes immediately. I almost wince as he squeezes off a shot. It cracks like a canon in the urban canyon. A hunting rifle? No silencer?

Who is this cheese-dick?

I swing my head back around to see Reginald Williamson sprawled on the sidewalk like a rag doll, a growing red carnation under his back. The startled people around him have hit the ground without any thought of dignity. Everyone except his wife. She continues to stand next to him despite the chaos, head turning left and right, eyes glancing up and down. Almost like she's looking for something.

Or someone.

She bends down next to her husband, somehow stately and elegant in the face of carnage, her blonde hair contrasting sharply with her long black coat. Through the scope I watch the victim's chest heave. Not a clean shot. A true marksman would have made sure that the prey was dead before hitting the ground. And this rooftop cowboy shot high: the slug caught the mark up by the collar bone. But the angle was favorable and that Remington packs plenty of punch – the bullet has probably made it down to the heart. Williamson will be dead before the ambulance gets there.

This asshole has just cost me 25 grand.

He's picking up the spent shell casing and walking swiftly towards the door that leads to the stairs, holding his rifle with the stock crammed under his armpit and the long barrel down by his knee.

Amateur.

A little voice in my head is screaming at me to pull chocks now and get the hell out of here. In a moment all hell's gonna break. There's fresh kill on the ground and I'm holed up right in the middle of the hot zone with a sniper rifle in my lap.

So why am I still standing here with my thumb in my ass?

What I do next goes against all my training, all my commonsense, my very survival instincts. It's a visceral response in a profession where only the calculating are successful. It's a rash, knee-jerk reaction. Stupid, risky.

Necessary.

I center myself with even breaths – this won't be easy. No tripod, a moving target, a couple hundred meters. And no time to think about it, he's almost made it to the door. I sight quick and steady and squeeze the trigger. The silencer pops like a skipping stone hitting the water. Bingo. The bullet catches him in the back and spins him around. He staggers backwards against the metal door and slumps down into a ghastly sitting position. I frown in disgust. It wasn't a pretty shot. The bullet caught him lower than I wanted. He'll die, but not right away – it'll take four or five minutes for him to bleed out internally. Death by hollow point. Through the scope I watch his eyes moving spastically and I swear he can see me set the rifle down and retrieve the spent shell.

But I know all he can see is his life flashing before his eyes.

Five days go by. Five days holed up in a fleabag motel on the other side of town. Five days behind the wheel of a rented Ford. Five more days of east coast cold and McDonald's coffee. Five more days with two corpses stinking up the city morgue. Five more days with the cops crawling around everywhere looking for a mysterious gunman. I should've been out of here before the barrel cooled.

I have to risk the exposure – I have unfinished business to take care of. I've done the best contingency planning I could do. It's not all as pat and sure as I'd like it to be but each hour I spend here ratchets up the risk.

Proceed to endgame.

I'm up on top of a 50 foot water tank laying on cold metal as snowflakes fall lightly all around. It's not the ideal spot, but it'll have to do. It's too open on top and I feel exposed. But at least it's set back in some thick pines, halfway secluded. The rental is parked nearby and the freeway is a quarter click east. Still, I don't like, not at all. But I can't risk staying in town any longer. This is as good as it gets.

I set up the low tripod and prop myself up on my elbows. I watch again as the scope reveals its crosshair truths to me. I lift my head and rub my eyes, gazing at the bare trees bleached against a gunmetal sky. The grass is more brown than green, more matted than mowed. Curled and damp leaves litter the ground. A trickle of a stream winds its way around manicured bushes and under daintily arched bridges. Dotted here and there are bouquets of bright flowers and garish plastic flags, oddly contrasted against the muted backdrop of February gray and the silent march of grayer headstones.

A pretty lousy day for a funeral.

Helen Williamson looks good, even from this distance. She's wearing black, of course. Her tapered legs are covered by a long designer coat and hose above subdued high heels. Her hair is coiffure Cosmo cover perfect. As her departed husband's sole beneficiary, she's got a couple million reasons to look

good. A few friends and family members accompany her back up the walkway from where her dear husband was just lowered into the ground. From this distance I can't see her eyes but I let my imagination do its thing – they're brimmed with tears, but no more than a couple escape to trace their salty path across those sculpted cheekbones. Enough to show she's hurting, but not enough to smear the mascara. I almost respect the cold-hearted bitch.

Getting a clean shot will be a bit dicey – all the well-wishers will feel the need to stay close to the recently widowed woman, to comfort and support her. I'll have to be careful not to hit an innocent bystander. This isn't Baghdad – collateral damage is frowned upon in the private sector.

I really hate these spouse hits.

Right when she's getting into her car, that's when I'll have my best shot. I follow her with the scope as she makes slow progress toward the parking lot through a flurry of hugs and heartfelt embraces. She eats it all up, with somber nods and half-smiles. Pose, smile, wave, choke back a tear. Lather, rinse, repeat.

The woman is a real piece of work.

Then the world slows down as she nears the car. The sounds of traffic and cawing crows withdraw. The cold metal beneath me warms to body temp. The smell of wet pine gives way to nothing more than the tang of machine oil. And the muted sky bends itself around the scope until all the world is framed in crosshairs. I focus all my concentration into the spaces between heartbeats.

Helen Williamson, widow. Helen Williamson, killer. She paid some hack to off her husband. It was rash and sloppy – a rush to murder. That's probably what saved her life. At least temporarily. But she's only half of this sordid equation. Mr. Williamson wasn't much better. Her husband burned with an even deeper hatred. He was more calculating, a real planner. He took to the task with typical VP determination. He went through the proper channels, talked to someone who talked to someone who made a few calls, one of them to me. And of course I waited until the down payment posted in my offshore account.

Fifty percent up front, fifty percent when the job is done.

Then I spent two weeks observing and researching, planning with an attention to detail that any VP would appreciate. Learning her habits, her routine. Getting inside her world, getting inside her head. Taking the time to do it the right way. Only to have some yahoo deep six my client right in front of me with a god-damned hunting rifle.

25 grand down the drain.

But this isn't about the money. It's about the old days, about the code. It's about ancient traditions and honor among thieves. Honor among killers. And yeah, in some sort of strange way, this is about my dad, about what he would've wanted.

And now here we are, at the end of a sordid little series of events, too many of which have been out of my control. But now, finally, I hold all the cards. And a loaded Walther 2000. I'm ready for the kill. And what better place? Right here in front of the man who paid for the hit: her husband.

Helen Williamson's coat swirls as she gives the small crowd one last black-gloved wave. She turns toward the limo.

It's the last thing she'll ever do.

I take a measured breath and squeeze the trigger: a pop and a puff. It's a clean shot. She's dead before she hits the ground.

I pick up the hot shell from a tuft of snow and shove it my pocket.