

PROLOGUE

The dimpled demon cuts through the atmosphere like a surface-to-air missile, rising and spinning and curving. He follows its flight with rapt attention, admires its simple beauty, urges it on with a tilt of his head and a turn of his hips. After a moment it disappears against the gray sky, and he imagines it reappearing against green turf near the edge of the fairway, bouncing and rolling to a stop a few paces short of a bunker.

A flicker of doubt crosses his face. He could be wrong about everything — the distance, the lie, the wind, the club, his swing. Some factor he can't even name.

Then the white blur drops from the heavens and strikes the earth with a firm thump. It bounces, rolls, settles almost exactly where he hoped.

Maybe there is order in the world after all.

He steers the electric cart up the center of the fairway, one hand on the wheel, cool wind stirring his blue collar. Tall pines line the left. Silver water flashes through reeds on the right. The fairway runs straight ahead. For a moment, he allows himself the illusion of peace — the hum of the motor, the hush of wind in the trees.

He is not at war. Not yet. He is a man on a golf vacation, hiding in plain sight.

Halfway to the ball, decay and deceit tug at him, whispering to him, pulling like gravity from under the wheels. Victims of crimes long buried and crimes ongoing.

His own family is calling his name. Pleading.

He swallows and forces the thought down.

Not yet.

He killed a man three weeks ago and felt nothing. He wants to kill again. Finish it.

But not yet.

He stops the cart and scans the tree line. If someone is watching — through binoculars or a rifle scope — they will see only another golfer. His rage is hidden beneath the cap, along with his name.

For now, he will play the rabbit. He will blend until he vanishes. He will survive.

When he understands who is hunting his family, he will become the wolf.

He spots the ball and rolls forward, already rehearsing the ritual he repeats each night: cheap motel, pistol on the nightstand, folders spread across the bed. He will wander the maze again, searching for the door that leads back to his pursuer.

For now, he focuses on the moment.

Select a club.

Address the ball.

Breath in.

Breath out.

Strike.

That evening, Jack Logan checks into a shabby Days Inn. He eats a takeout burger while watching cable news. He tries to remember which name he gave the clerk. Then he spreads a stack of folders across the bed and selects one.

The file folder is labeled:

Major Buster Baldwin.

CHAPTER ONE

Buster Baldwin pulls the car over at his pre-selected spot in Winter Springs among stucco homes with three-car garages and kills the engine. He checks the rearview mirror. Then his watch.

Twenty minutes.

Daddy should come running past right about then, starting his usual loop through the neighborhood toward the bike trail. Thirty minutes is the shortest run Daddy's done in the seven days Buster has been watching him.

The plan is clear and simple.

Buster likes clear and simple.

The objective: take the girl and make it look like Daddy snapped and stabbed her to death. Deliver her to Miami.

Buster has already planted cameras and taken photos of the girl naked in the bathroom, stepping in and out of the shower. The police will find the files on Daddy's computer—hidden, but not too well. He borrowed Daddy's car from the office parking lot and drove it into the muck at Lake Jesup, leaving tire tracks near the shoreline.

Plenty of hungry gators in that lake.

He's wearing Daddy's uniform: baseball cap, gray T-shirt, khaki shorts. He's driving a rented Nissan identical to the one in Daddy's garage, right down to the Orlando Magic bumper sticker.

Buster opens the glove box and checks the syringe.

"That much should put her out long enough," the voice had said.

He doesn't want to hurt the girl. He tells himself the effects are temporary. Just a long nap.

He slips the syringe into his left pocket, checks the stun gun in his right.

The slap of sneakers on pavement.

Then the man appears in the mirror.

Daddy runs past.

Buster takes a slow breath.

Time for action.

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Driving on Interstate-4 with the sun in his eyes, Buster approaches the Seminole Hard Rock Casino in Tampa, tells himself that package delivery isn't due in Miami for another six hours. Plenty of time for some well-earned recreation.

The voice won't even know.

He backs the car to the wall on parking level three.

At the poker table, the chips stacked in front of him, Cleavage delivers his third gin and tonic and a smile.

"Here you go, hon."

He slips her a twenty and takes a long pull through the tiny straw before turning back to the table.

When the bet comes around, Buster tosses chips into the pot without hesitation and looks across the table, admiring the red-haired hooker on the arm of the loser with the mustache.

"I'll raise you a hundred," Mr. Mustache announces weakly.

Redhead smiles brightly and reaches out with polished nails, places a green chip on the pile.

Buster wonders what happened to make Redhead start selling herself. Maybe nothing. Maybe she did what he had done — took inventory and figured out what the world was willing to pay for.

Graybeard folds and so does Cowboy Hat. Buster checks his watch.

Jesus. Time to go.

Buster throws down his cards, letting Mr. Mustache take his first pot. The players lean back and watch the man grin and collect his chips along with Redhead, letting him have his moment.

"Mr. Cue Ball, you have eroded the integrity of the game by letting that slack-jawed moron win a hand," growls Cowboy Hat, sitting next to him.

Buster had shaved his head years ago — making himself a lean and mean fighting machine. He remembers some of the comeback lines they threw around playing cards in Kabul.

"Have you ever had the queens of hearts pounded up your ass with a boot?"

"Keep it up and we'll be betting on how long you're in a coma."

Buster stands, drains his drink, looks down at Cowboy Hat.

"Slack-jawed moron, you say? I'm up about four grand — half of it donated by you."

He leans in closer.

"So who's the bigger moron here, steer fucker? Him or you?"

Buster holds Cowboy Hat's eyes for a full eight seconds, timed like a bull rider. Cowboy Hat looks away.

In the parking structure, Buster fingers the poker winnings in his pocket and searches, locating the Nissan backed against the far wall.

He does a 360 check. He's alone.

The voice told him not to, but he can't help himself.

He slips behind the car.

He opens the trunk.

She's still out, still breathing.

"You're okay," he whispers.

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Driving south on I-75, Buster tells himself the freelance business is working. Two or three more contracts like this one and he's done—buy a small place in the Caymans, settle down with a curvy island girl, raise a couple of kids.

Half the fee is already offshore. The rest wires on delivery.

They'll pay. If they don't, he can plant the girl's blood and call it in:

Contract job. Rental car—Florida plate SU2768. Check the trunk.

Yes. They'll pay. The client doesn't hold all the cards.

The voice was careful to conceal his identity, and Buster likes that. Unknown clients worry less about exposure. Ex-military, maybe intelligence—covert action. Off-the-books favor for some rich bastard. He doesn't need to know. Better not to.

By Sarasota he's sober. Thinking. Uneasy now.

Maybe the job isn't so clear and simple after all.

The girl in the trunk. Her father.

Maybe the voice lied.

"It's a rescue. The father's abusing the daughter."

Not true. Buster watched them for a week. Daddy was a good dad.

He exhales, tightens his grip on the wheel. The lie feels like a poker tell. The client worried the war hero might hesitate, so they fed him a story. He'd seen HUMINT collectors do it—say the right thing and men will do what they'd never otherwise do.

Which means he's viewed as a potential liability.

Not good. The whole point of anonymity is not being a liability.

He thinks about the jobs that started coming his way a few months back. Different countries. Different covers. Same elite competence. Same paydays. Same secrecy.

“The money is for your silence. You acknowledge nothing. Ever. You talk—you die.”

He hasn’t talked.

At a gas station near Naples, he pays cash, pumps, scans the lot. They could be watching him right now.

Approaching Alligator Alley, he prays out loud.

“Dear Lord, thank you for this job—and the chance to rescue a precious girl. At least that’s what they told me. I can’t tell truth from lies anymore. Help me understand what’s happening. I promise I’ll never kill again. I’m lost. Completely lost.”

Nothing.

Near Miami International Airport, he backs the Nissan four feet from the rear bumper of a white panel van. No moon. Trees swallow the motel behind him. Across the street, a dead gas station is choked with weeds.

Perfect.

He kills the lights.

Opens the door—

A figure steps out of the dark, shotgun leveled at his chest.

“Bang. You’re dead. Now who’s the moron?”

Familiar voice.

“On your knees, Cue Ball.”

Cowboy Hat.

Fuck.

Buster drops, hands up. His pistol is in the glove box. Not many options. He sets his feet, ready to lunge.

“You’re not that quick, Major. Nobody is.”

The voice is flatter now. Less cowboy and more military.

Recognition lands.

“Jesus Christ, Dex,” Buster exhales. “I think I pissed myself.”

“Learn from it, soldier,” Dex says. “Maybe you’ll shake a tail next time.”

Dex lowers the shotgun, hauls him up.

“You’re lucky it was me recommended you for this op. Let’s move the girl.”

Relief drains through Buster like water from a tub. There's no smarter operator than Major Dexter West.

"Man, I'm glad to see you," Buster says. "Can't believe I didn't make you at the casino."

"My own mother wouldn't have."

"So they've got you watching over this?"

"Roger that. Let's be quick."

They open the trunk. The girl lies limp on her side.

"You gave her enough?" Dex asks.

"I'll give her more to be safe."

They transfer her to the van. Buster props her head, checks her pulse.

"Strong. Breathing's steady."

Dex leans in, fingers at her carotid.

"What's this job really about?" Buster asks.

Dex doesn't answer.

"She's fine. Get the syringe."

Buster steps back to the Nissan, retrieves the vial. Glances at Dex—Bermuda shorts, polo, gray at the temples. Suburban dad. Not the man he remembers from Kandahar, AK in his hands, clerics dead at his feet.

Was Dex the voice?

Better not to ask.

Dex steps aside. Buster climbs in, draws the liquid, injects her thigh.

"So, Dex—did you sandbag at the poker table, or did I take your money fair and square?"

He backs out and slides the van door shut.

He never sees the knife.

The blade opens his throat—clean, deep.

Buster drops to his knees. For a second, he's somewhere else: his sister at Special Olympics, a college girl smiling, asking where he grew up. Dress blues. The flag.

Then the other girl—her face, the fear when he rushed her with the stun gun.

He pitches forward, his life's blood spilling across the asphalt.

His lips move, but no sound.

"I'm sorry."